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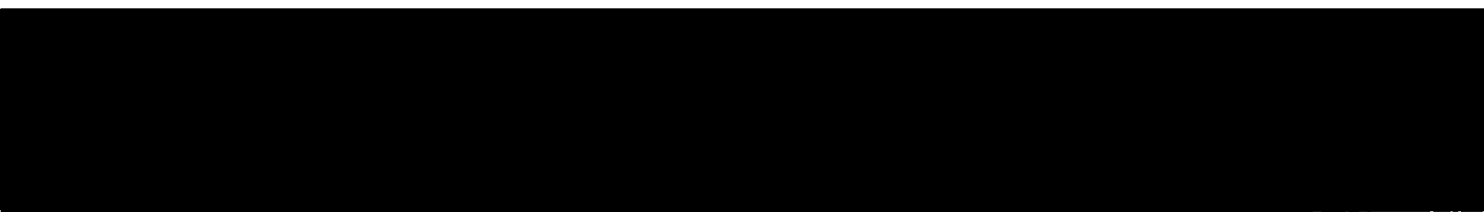
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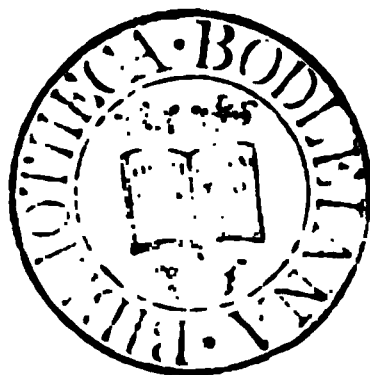
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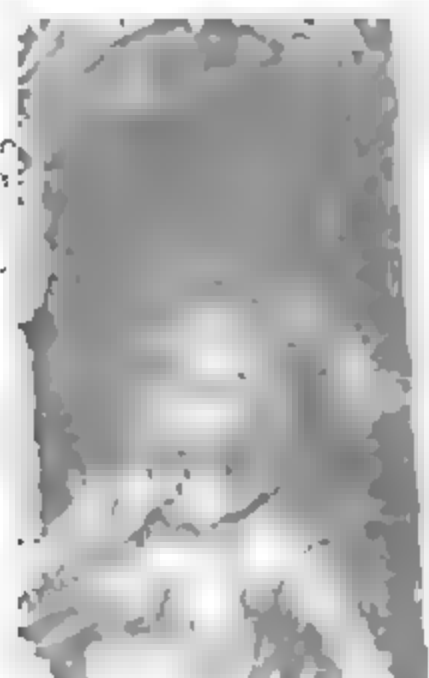
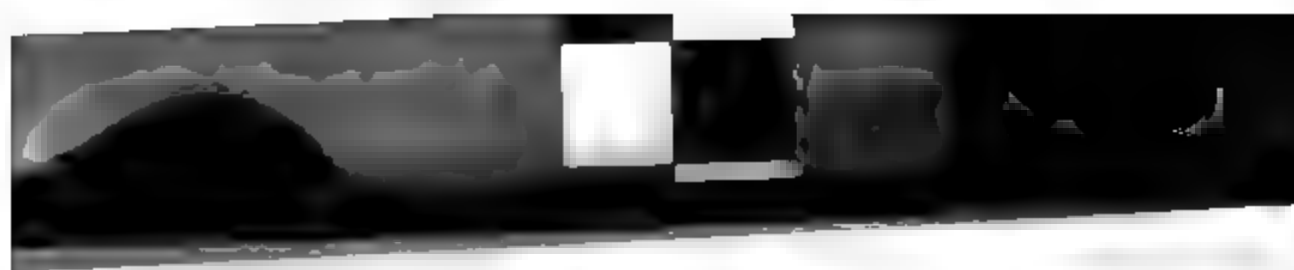
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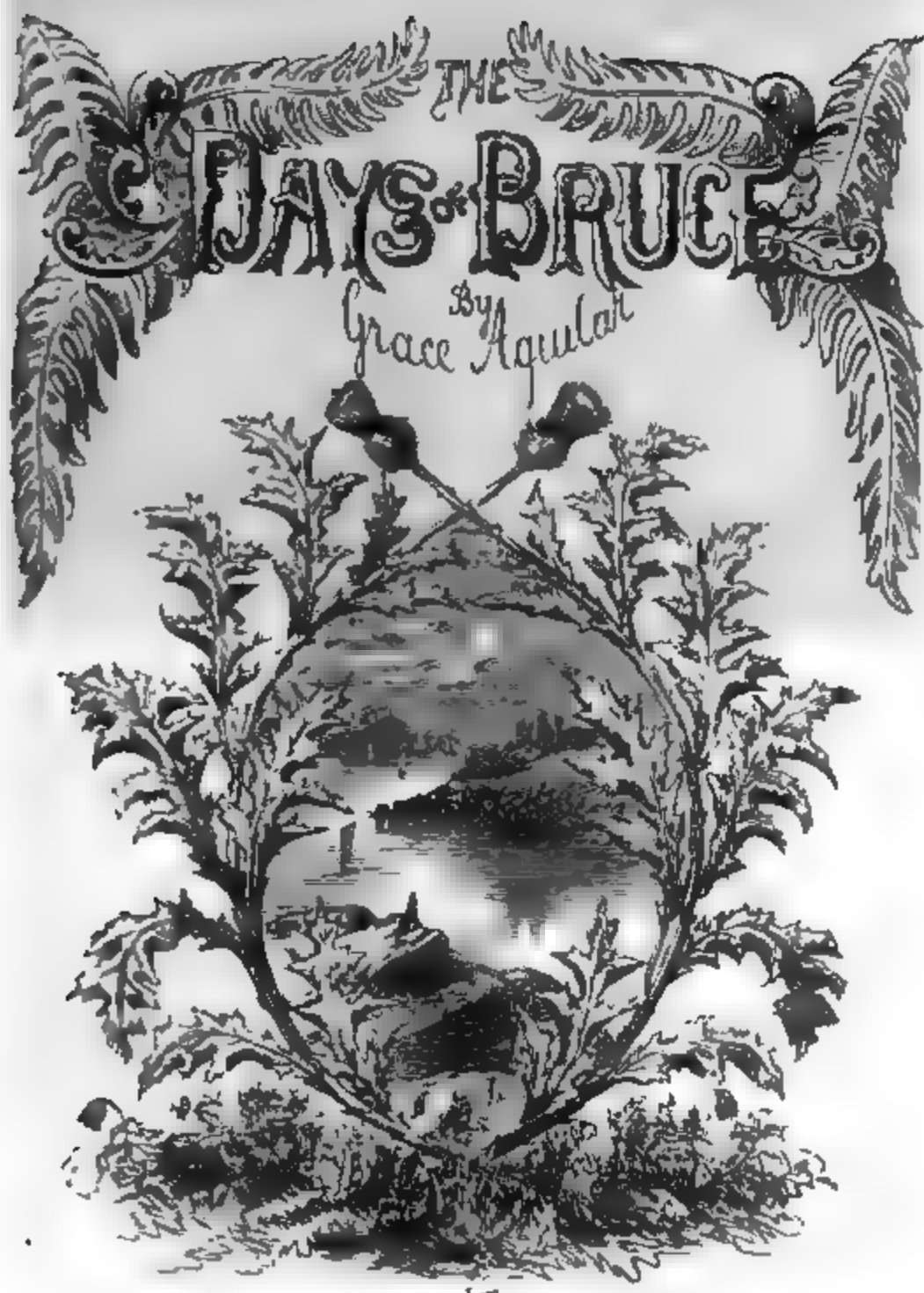




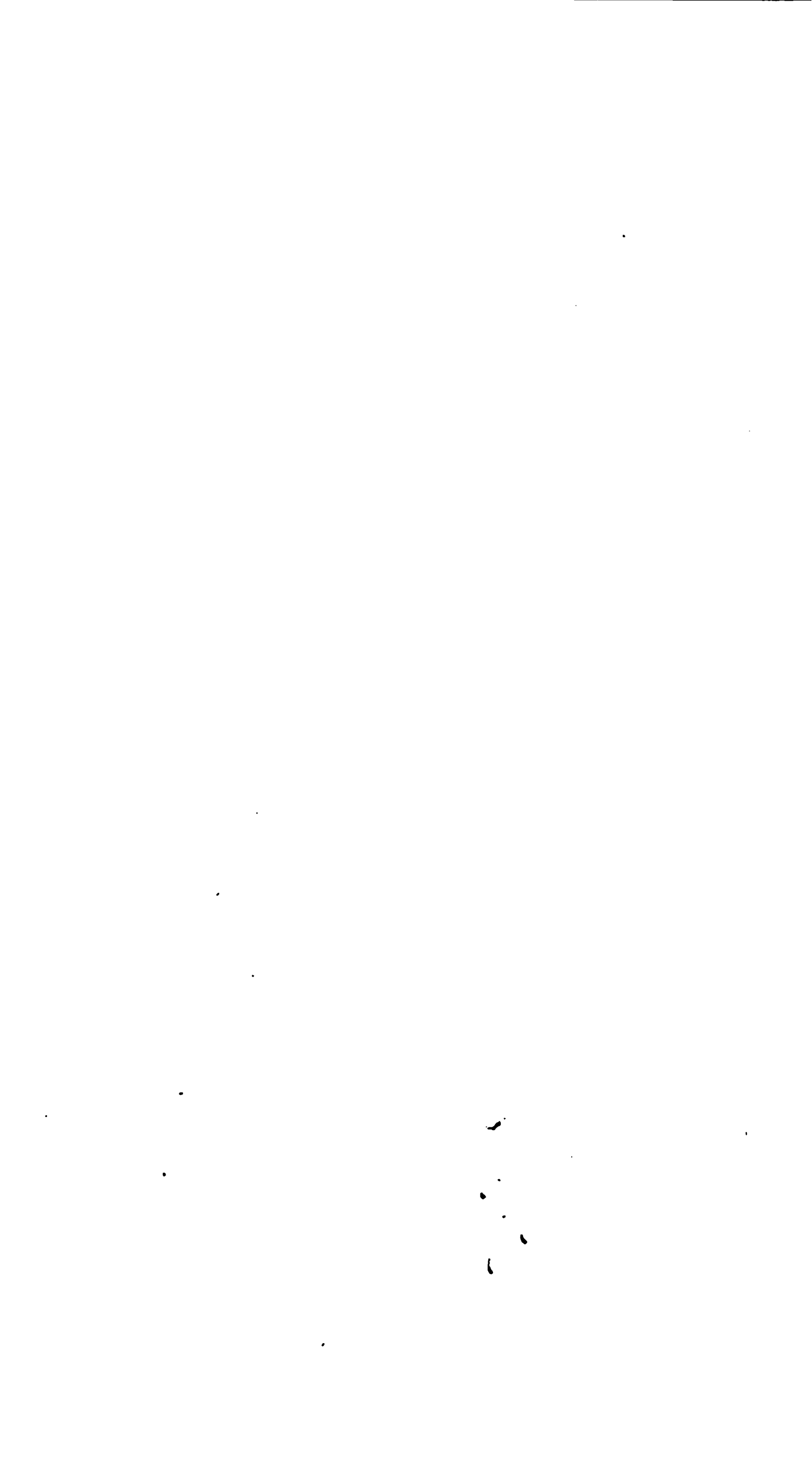








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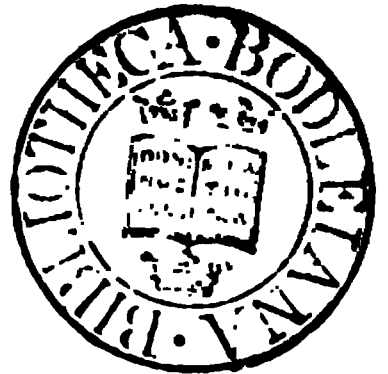


THE
DAYS OF BRUCE.

A STORY FROM SCOTTISH HISTORY.

BY
GRACE AGUILAR,
AUTHOR OF "HOME INFLUENCE;" "WOMAN'S FRIENDSHIP;"
"VALE OF CEDARS, ETC., ETC."

Fourteenth Edition.



WITH ILLUSTRATIONS
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P R E F A C E.

As these pages have passed through the press, mingled feelings of pain and pleasure have actuated my heart. Who shall speak the regret that she, to whom its composition was a work of love, cannot participate in the joy which its publication would have occasioned—who shall tell of that anxious pleasure which I feel in witnessing the success of each and all the efforts of her pen?

The Days of Bruce must be considered as an endeavour to place before the reader an interesting narrative of a period of history, in itself a romance, and one perhaps as delightful as could well have been selected. In combination with the story of Scotland's brave deliverer, it must be viewed as an illustration of female character, and descriptive of much that its Author considered excellent in woman. In the high-minded Isabella of Buchan is traced the resignation of a heart wounded in its best affections, yet trustful midst accumulated misery. In Isoline



PREFACE

may be seen the self-inflicted unhappiness of a too confident and self reliant nature; while in Agnes is delineated the overwhelming of a mind, too much akin to heaven in purity and innocence to battle with the stern and bitter sorrows with which her life is strewn.

How far the merits of this work may be perceived becomes not me to judge; I only know and *feel* that on me has devolved the endearing task of publishing the writings of my lamented child, that I am fulfilling the desire of her life.

SARAH AGUILAR.

May, 1852.

THE DAYS OF BRUCE.

CHAPTER I.

THE month of March, rough and stormy as it is in England, would perhaps be deemed mild and beautiful as May by those accustomed to meet and brave its fury in the eastern Highlands, nor would the evening on which our tale commences belie its wild and fitful character.

The wind howled round the ancient Tower of Buchan, in alternate gusts of wailing and of fury, so mingled with the deep, heavy roll of the lashing waves, that it was impossible to distinguish the roar of the one element from the howl of the other. Neither tree, hill, nor wood intercepted the rushing gale, to change the dull monotony of its gloomy tone. The Ythan, indeed, darted by, swollen and turbid from continued storms, threatening to overflow the barren plain it watered, but its voice was undistinguishable amidst the louder wail of wind and ocean. Pine trees, dark, ragged, and stunted, and scattered so widely apart that each one seemed monarch of some thirty acres, were the only traces of vegetation for miles round. Nor were human habitations more abundant; indeed, few dwellings, save those of such solid masonry as the Tower of Buchan, could hope to stand scathless amidst the storms that in winter ever swept along the moor.

No architectural beauty distinguished the residence of the Earls of Buchan; none of that tasteful decoration peculiar to the Saxon, nor of the more sombre yet more imposing style introduced by the Norman, and known as the Gothic architecture

Originally a hunting-lodge, it had been continually enlarged

by succeeding lords, without any regard either to symmetry or proportion, elegance or convenience ; and now, early in the year 1306, appeared within its outer walls as a most heterogeneous mass of ill-shaped turrets, courts, offices, and galleries, huddled together in ill-sorted confusion, though presenting to the distant view a massive square building, remarkable only for a strength and solidity capable of resisting alike the war of elements and of man.

Without all seemed a dreary wilderness, but within existed indisputable signs of active life. The warlike inhabitants of the tower, though comparatively few in number, were continually passing to and fro in the courts and galleries, or congregating in little knots, in eager converse. Some cleansing their armour or arranging banners ; others, young and active, practising the various manœuvres of mimic war ; each and all bearing on their brow that indescribable expression of anticipation and excitement which seems ever on the expectant of it knows not what. The condition of Scotland was indeed such as to keep her sons constantly on the alert, preparing for defence or attack, as the insurging efforts of the English or the commands of their lords should determine. From the richest noble to the veriest serf, the aged man to the little child, however contrary their politics and feelings, one spirit actuated all, and that spirit was war — war in all its deadliest evils, its unmitigated horrors, for it was native blood which deluged the rich plains, the smiling vales, and fertile hills of Scotland.

Although the castle of Buchan resembled more a citadel intended for the accommodation of armed vassals than the commodious dwelling of feudal lords, one turret gave evidence, by its internal arrangement, of a degree of refinement and a nearer approach to comfort than its fellows, and seeming to proclaim that within its massive walls the lords of the castle were accustomed to reside. The apartments were either hung with heavy tapestry, which displayed, in gigantic proportions, the combats of the Scots and Danes, or panelled with polished oak, rivalling ebony in its glossy blackness, inlaid with solid silver. Heavy draperies of damask fell from the ceiling to the floor at every window, a pleasant guard, indeed, from the constant winds which found entrance through many creaks and corners of the gothic casements, but imparting a dingy

aspect to apartments lordly in their dimensions, and somewhat rich in decoration.

The deep embrasures of the casements were thus in a manner severed from the main apartment, for even when the curtains were completely lowered there was space enough to contain a chair or two, and a table. The furniture corresponded in solidity and proportion to the panelling or tapestry of the walls; nor was there any approach even at those doubtful comforts already introduced in the more luxurious Norman castles of South Britain.

The group, however, assembled in one of these ancient rooms needed not the aid of adventitious ornament to betray the nobility of birth, and those exalted and chivalric feelings inherent to their rank. The sun, whose stormy radiance during the day had alternately deluged earth and sky with fitful yet glorious brilliance, and then, burying itself in the dark masses of overhanging clouds, robed every object in deepest gloom, now seemed to concentrate his departing rays in one living flood of splendour, and darting within the chamber, lingered in crimson glory around the youthful form of a gentle girl, dyeing her long and clustering curls with gold. Slightly bending over a large and cumbrous frame which supported her embroidery, her attitude could no more conceal the grace and lightness of her child-like form, than the glossy ringlets the soft and radiant features which they shaded. There was archness lurking in those dark blue eyes, to which tears seemed yet a stranger; the clear and snowy forehead, the full red lip, and health-bespeaking cheek had surely seen but smiles, and mirrored but the joyous light which filled her gentle heart. Her figure seemed to speak a child, but there was a something in that face, bright, glowing as it was, which yet would tell of somewhat more than childhood—that seventeen summers had done their work, and taught that guileless heart a sterner tale than gladness.

A young man, but three or four years her senior, occupied an embroidered settle at her feet. In complexion, as in the colour of his hair and eyes, there was similarity between them, but the likeness went no farther, nor would the most casual observer have looked on them as kindred. Fair and lovely as the maiden would even have been pronounced, it was perhaps more the expression, the sweet

innocence that characterised her features which gave to them their charm ; but in the young man there was infinitely more than this, though effeminate as was his complexion, and the bright sunny curls which floated over his throat, he was eminently and indescribably beautiful, for it was the mind, the glorious mind, the kindling spirit which threw their radiance over his perfect features ; the spirit and mind which that noble form enshrined stood apart, and though he knew it not himself, found not their equal in that dark period of warfare and of woe. The sword and lance were the only instruments of the feudal aristocracy ; ambition, power, warlike fame the principal occupants of their thoughts ; the chase, the tourney, or the foray the relaxation of their spirits. But unless that face deceived, there was more, much more, which characterised the elder youth within that chamber.

A large and antique volume of Norse legends rested on his knee, which, in a rich manly voice, he was reading aloud to his companion, diversifying his lecture with remarks and explanations, which, from the happy smiles and earnest attention of the maiden, appeared to impart the pleasure intended by the speaker. The other visible inhabitant of the apartment was a noble-looking boy of about fifteen, far less steadily employed than his companions, for at one time he was poising a heavy lance, and throwing himself into the various attitudes of a finished warrior ; at others, brandishing a two-handed sword, somewhat taller than himself ; then glancing over the shoulder of his sister—for so nearly was he connected with the maiden, though the raven curls, the bright flashing eye of jet, and darker skin appeared to forswear such near relationship—criticising her embroidery, and then transferring his scrutiny to the strange figures on the gorgeously-illuminated manuscript, and then for a longer period listening, as it were, irresistibly to the wild legends which that deep voice was so melodiously pouring forth.

"It will never do, Agnes. You cannot embroider the coronation of Kenneth MacAlpine and listen to these wild tales at one and the same time. Look at your clever pupil, Sir Nigel ; she is placing a heavy iron buckler on the poor king's head instead of his golden crown." The boy laughed long and merrily as he spoke, and even Sir Nigel smiled ;

while Agnes, blushing and confused, replied, half jestingly and half earnestly, "And why not tell me of it before, Alan? you must have seen it long ago."

"And so I did, sweet sister mine; but I wished to see the effect of such marvellous abstraction, and whether, in case of necessity, an iron shield would serve our purpose as well as a jewelled diadem."

"Never fear, my boy. Let but the king stand forth, and there will be Scottish men enow and willing to convert an iron buckler into a goodly crown;" and as Sir Nigel spoke his eyes flashed, and his whole countenance irradiated with a spirit that might not have been suspected when in the act of reading, but which evidently only slept till awakened by an all-sufficient call. "Let the tyrant Edward exult in the possession of our country's crown and sceptre—he may find we need not them to make a king; aye, and a king to snatch the regal diadem from the proud usurper's brow—the Scottish sceptre from his blood-stained hands."

"Thou talkest wildly, Nigel," answered the lad sorrowfully, his features assuming an expression of judgment and feeling beyond his years. "Who is there in Scotland will do this thing? who will dare again the tyrant's rage? Is not this unhappy country divided within itself, and how may it resist the foreign foe?"

"Wallace! think of Wallace! Did he not well-nigh wrest our country from the tyrant's hands? And is there not one to follow in the path he trod—no noble heart to do what he hath done?"

"Nigel, yes. Let but the rightful king stand forth, and were there none other, I—even I, stripling as I am, with my good sword and single arm, even with the dark blood of Comyn in my veins, Alan of Buchan, would join him, aye, and die for him."

"There spoke the blood of Duff, and not of Comyn!" burst impetuously from the lips of Nigel, as he grasped the stripling's ready hand; "and doubt not, noble boy, there are other hearts in Scotland bold and true as thine; and even as Wallace, one will yet arise to wake them from their stagnant sleep, and give them freedom."

"Wallace," said the maiden, fearfully; "ye talk of Wallace, of his bold deeds and bolder heart, but bethink

ye of his *fate*. Oh, were it not better to be still than follow in his steps unto the scaffold !”

“Dearest, no ; better the scaffold and the axe, aye, even the iron chains and hangman’s cord, than the gilded fetters of a tyrant’s yoke. Shame on thee, sweet Agnes, to counsel thoughts as these, and thou a Scottish maiden.” Yet even as he spoke chidingly, the voice of Nigel became soft and thrilling, even as it had before been bold and daring.

“I fear me, Nigel, I have but little of my mother’s blood within my veins. I cannot bid them throb and bound as hers with patriotic love and warrior fire. A lowly cot with him I loved were happiness for me.”

“But that cot must rest upon a soil unchained, sweet Agnes, or joy could have no resting there. Wherefore did Scotland rise against her tyrant,—why struggle as she hath to fling aside her chains? Was it her noble sons? Alas, alas! degenerate and base, they sought chivalric fame; forgetful of their country, they asked for knighthood from proud Edward’s hand, regardless that that hand had crowded fetters on their father-land, and would enslave their sons. Not to them did Scotland owe the transient gleam of glorious light which, though extinguished in the patriot’s blood, hath left its trace behind. With the bold, the hardy, lowly Scot that gleam had birth; they would be free to them. What mattered that their tyrant was a valiant knight, a worthy son of chivalry: they saw but an usurper, an enslaver, and they rose and spurned his smile—aye, and they *will* rise again. And wert thou one of them, sweet girl, a cotter’s wife, thou too wouldst pine for freedom. Yes; Scotland will bethink her of her warrior’s fate, and shout aloud revenge for Wallace !”

Either his argument was unanswerable, or the energy of his voice and manner carried conviction with them, but a brighter glow mantled the maiden’s cheek, and with it stole the momentary shame—the wish, the simple words that she had spoken could be recalled.

“Give us but a king for whom to fight,—a king to love, revere, obey,—a king from whose hand knighthood were an honour, precious as life itself, and there are noble hearts enough to swear fealty to him, and bright swords ready to defend his throne,” said the young heir of Buchan, as he brandished his own weapon above his head, and then

rested his arms upon its broad hilt, despondingly. "But where is that king? Men speak of my most gentle kinsman Sir John Comyn, called the Red—bah! The sceptre were the same jewelled bauble in his impotent hand as in his sapient uncle's; a gem, a toy, forsooth, the loan of crafty Edward. No! the Red Comyn is no king for Scotland; and who is there beside? The rightful heir—a cold, dull-blooded neutral—a wild and wavering changeling. I pray thee be not angered, Nigel; it cannot be gainsaid, e'en though he is thy brother."

"I know it, Alan; know it but too well," answered Nigel, sadly, though the dark glow rushed up to cheek and brow. "Yet Robert's blood is hot enough. His deeds are plunged in mystery,—his words not less so; yet I cannot look on him as thou dost, as, alas! too many do. It may be that I love him all too well; that dearer even than Edward, than all the rest, has Robert ever been to me. He knows it not; for sixteen years my senior, he has ever held me as a child taking little heed of his wayward course; and yet my heart has throbbed beneath his word, his look, as if he were not what he seemed, but would—but must be something more!"

"I ever thought thee but a wild enthusiast, gentle Nigel, and this confirms it. Mystery, aye, such mystery as ever springs from actions at variance with reason, judgment, valour—with all that frames the patriot. Would that thou wert the representative of thy royal line; wert thou in Earl Robert's place, thus, thus would Alan kneel to thee and hail thee king!"

"Peace, peace, thou foolish boy, the crown and sceptre have no charm for me; let me but see my country free, the tyrant humbled, my brother as my trusting spirit whispers he *shall* be, and Nigel asks no more."

"Art thou indeed so modest, gentle Nigel—is thy happiness so distinct from self? thine eyes tell other tales sometimes, and speak they false, fair sir?"

Timidly, yet irresistibly, the maiden glanced up from her embroidery, but the gaze that met hers caused those bright eyes to fall more quickly than they were raised, and vainly for a few seconds did she endeavour so to steady her hand as to resume her task. Nigel was, however, spared reply, for a sharp and sudden bugle blast reverberated through the

tower, and with an exclamation of wondering inquiry Alan bounded from the chamber. There was one other inmate of that apartment, whose presence, although known and felt, had, as was evident, been no restraint either to the employments or the sentiments of the two youths and their companion. Their conversation had not passed unheeded, although it had elicited no comment or rejoinder. The Countess of Buchan stood within one of those deep embrasures we have noticed, at times glancing towards the youthful group with an earnestness of sorrowing affection, that seemed to have no measure in its depth, no shrinking in its might; at others, fixing a long, unmeaning, yet somewhat anxious gaze on the wide plain and distant ocean, which the casement overlooked.

It was impossible to look once on the countenance of Isabella of Buchan, and yet forbear to look again. The calm dignity, the graceful majesty of her figure seemed to mark her as one born to command, to hold in willing homage the minds and inclinations of men; her pure, pale brow and marble cheek—for the rich rose seemed a stranger there—the long silky lash of jet, the large, full black eye, in its repose so soft, that few would guess how it could flash fire, and light up those classic features with power to stir the stagnant souls of thousands and guide them with a word. She looked in feature as in form a queen; fitted to be beloved, formed to be obeyed. Her heavy robe of dark brocade, wrought with thick threads of gold, seemed well suited to her majestic form; its long, loose folds detracting nought from the graceful ease of her carriage. Her thick, glossy hair, vying in its rich blackness with the raven's wing, was laid in smooth bands upon her stately brow, and gathered up behind in a careless knot, confined with a bodkin of massive gold. The hood or coif, formed of curiously-twisted black and golden threads, which she wore in compliance with the Scottish custom, that thus made the distinction between the matron and the maiden, took not from the peculiarly graceful form of the head, nor in any part concealed the richness of the hair. Calm and pensive as was the general expression of her countenance, few could look upon it without that peculiar sensation of respect, approaching to awe, which restrained and conquered sorrow ever calls for. Perchance the cause of

such emotion was all too delicate, too deeply veiled, to be defined by those rude hearts who were yet conscious of its existence; and for them it was enough to own her power, bow before it, and fear her as a being set apart.

Musingly she had stood looking forth on the wide waste; the distant ocean, whose tumbling waves one moment gleamed in living light, at others immersed in inky blackness, were scarcely distinguished from the lowering sky. The moaning winds swept by, bearing the storm-cloud on their wings; patches of blue gleamed strangely and brightly forth; and, far in the west, crimson and amber, and pink and green, inlaid in beautiful mosaic the departing luminary's place of rest.

"Alas, my gentle one," she had internally responded to her daughter's words, "if thy mother's patriot heart could find no shield for woe, nor her warrior fire, as thou deemest it, guard her from woman's trials, what will be thy fate? This is no time for happy love, for peaceful joys, returned as it may be; for—may I doubt that truthful brow, that knightly soul (her glance was fixed on Nigel)—yet not now may the Scottish knight find rest and peace in woman's love. And better is it thus—the land of the slave is no home for love."

A faint yet a beautiful smile, dispersing as a momentary beam the anxiety stamped on her features, awoke at the enthusiastic reply of Nigel. Then she turned again to the casement, for her quick eye had discerned a party of about ten horsemen approaching in the direction of the tower, and on the summons of the bugle she advanced from her retreat to the centre of the apartment.

"Why, surely thou art but a degenerate descendant of the brave Macduff, mine Agnes, that a bugle blast should thus send back every drop of blood to thy little heart," she said, playfully. "For shame, for shame! how art thou fitted to be a warrior's bride? They are but Scottish men, and true, methinks, if I recognise their leader rightly. And it is even so."

"Sir Robert Keith, right welcome," she added, as, marshalled by young Alan, the knight appeared, bearing his plumed helmet in his hand, and displaying haste and eagerness alike in his flushed features and soiled armour.

"Ye have ridden long and hastily. Bid them hasten our

evening meal, my son ; or stay, perchance Sir Robert needs thine aid to rid him of this garb of war. Thou canst not serve one nobler."

"Nay, noble lady, knights must don, not doff their armour now. I bring ye news, great, glorious news, which will not brook delay. A royal messenger I come, charged by his grace my king—my country's king—with missives to his friends, calling on all who spurn a tyrant's yoke—who love their land, their homes, their freedom—on all who wish for Wallace—to awake, arise, and join their patriot king !"

"Of whom speakest thou, Sir Robert Keith ? I charge thee, speak !" exclaimed Nigel, starting from the posture of dignified reserve with which he had welcomed the knight, and springing towards him.

"The patriot and the king !—of whom canst thou speak ?" said Alan, at the same instant. "Thine are, in very truth, marvellous tidings, Sir Knight ; an' thou canst call up one to unite such names, and worthy of them, he shall not call on me in vain."

"Is he not worthy, Alan of Buchan, who thus flings down the gauntlet, who thus dares the fury of a mighty sovereign, and with a handful of brave men prepares to follow in the steps of Wallace, to the throne or to the scaffold ?"

"Heed not my reckless boy, Sir Robert," said the countess, earnestly, as the eyes of her son fell beneath the knight's glance of fiery reproach ; "no heart is truer to his country, no arm more eager to rise in her defence."

"The king ! the king !" gasped Nigel, some strange overmastering emotion checking his utterance. "Who is it that has thus dared, thus—"

"And canst thou too ask, young sir ?" returned the knight, with a smile of peculiar meaning. "Is thy sovereign's name unknown to thee ? Is Robert Bruce a name unknown, unheard, unloved, and thou, too, breathest it not ?"

"My brother, my brave, my noble brother ;—I saw it, I knew it ! Thou wert no changling, no slavish neutral ; but even as I felt, thou art, thou wilt be ! My brother, my brother, I may live and die for thee !" and the young enthusiast raised his clasped hands above his head, as in speechless thanksgiving for these strange, exciting news ; his flushed cheek, his quivering lip, his moistened eye betraying an emotion which seemed for the space of a

moment to sink on the hearts of all who witnessed it, and hush each feeling into silence. A shout from the court below broke that momentary pause.

"God save king Robert! then, say I," vociferated Alan, eagerly grasping the knight's hand. "Sit, sit, Sir Knight; and for the love of heaven, speak more of this most wondrous tale. Erewhile, we hear of this goodly Earl of Carrick at Edward's court, doing him homage, serving him as his own English knight, and now in Scotland—aye, and Scotland's king. How may we reconcile these contradictions?"

"Rather how did he vanish from the tyrant's hundred eyes, and leave the court of England?" inquired Nigel, at the same instant as the Countess of Buchan demanded, somewhat anxiously—

"And Sir John Comyn, recognises he our sovereign's claim? Is he amongst the Bruce's slender train?"

A dark cloud gathered on the noble brow of the knight, replacing the chivalric courtesy with which he had hitherto responded to his interrogators. He paused ere he answered, in a stern, deep voice—

"Sir John Comyn lived and died a traitor, lady. He hath received the meed of his base treachery; his traitorous design for the renewed slavery of his country—the imprisonment and death of the only one that stood forth in her need."

"And by whom did the traitor die?" fiercely demanded the young heir of Buchan. "Mother, thy cheek is blanched; yet wherefore? Comyn as I am, shall we claim kindred with a traitor, and turn away from the good cause, because, forsooth, a traitorous Comyn dies? No; were the Bruce's own right hand red with the recreant's blood—he only is the Comyn's king."

"Thou hast said it, youthful lord," said the knight, impressively. "Alan of Buchan, bear that bold heart and patriot sword unto the Bruce's throne, and Comyn's traitorous name shall be forgotten in the scion of Macduff. Thy mother's loyal blood runs reddest in thy veins, young sir; too pure for Comyn's base alloy. Know, then, the Bruce's hand is red with the traitor's blood, and yet, fearless and firm in the holy justice of his cause, he calls on his nobles and their vassals for their homage and their aid—he calls on them to awake from their long sleep, and shake off

the iron yoke from their necks; to prove that Scotland—the free, the dauntless, the unconquered soil, which once spurned the Roman power, to which all other kingdoms bowed—is free, undaunted, and unconquered still. He calls aloud, aye, even on ye, wife and son of Comyn of Buchan, to snap the link that binds ye to a traitor's house, and prove—though darkly, basely flows the blood of Macduff in one descendant's vein, that the Earl of Fife refuses homage and allegiance to his sovereign—in ye it rushes free, and bold, and loyal still."

"And he shall find it so. Mother, why do ye not speak? You, from whose lips my heart first learnt to beat for Scotland; my lips to pray that one might come to save her from the yoke of tyranny. You, who taught me to forget all private feud, to merge all feeling, every claim, in the one great hope of Scotland's freedom. Now that the time is come, wherefore art thou thus? Mother, my own noble mother, let me go forth with thy blessing on my path, and ill and woe can come not near me. Speak to thy son!" The undaunted boy flung himself on his knee before the countess as he spoke. There was a dark and fearfully troubled expression on her noble features. She had clasped her hands together, as if to still or hide their unwonted trembling; but when she looked on those bright and glowing features, there came a dark, dread vision of blood, and the axe and cord, and she folded her arms around his neck, and sobbed in all a mother's irrepressible agony.

"My own, my beautiful, to what have I doomed thee!" she cried. "To death, to woe! aye, perchance, to that heaviest woe—a father's curse! exposing thee to death, to the ills of all who dare to strike for freedom. Alan, Alan, how can I bid thee forth to death? and yet it is I have taught thee to love it better than the safety of a slave; longed, prayed for this moment—deemed that for my country I could even give my child—and now, now—oh God of mercy, give me strength!"

She bent down her head on his, clasping him to her heart, as thus to still the tempest which had whelmed it. There is something terrible in that strong emotion which sometimes suddenly and unexpectedly overpowers the calmest and most controlled natures. It speaks of an agony so measureless, so beyond the relief of sympathy, that it falls like an

electric spell on the hearts of all witnesses, sweeping all minor passions into dust before it. Little accustomed as was Sir Robert Keith to sympathise in such emotions, he now turned hastily aside, and, as if fearing to trust himself in silence, commenced a hurried detail to Nigel Bruce of the Earl of Carrick's escape from London, and his present position. The young nobleman endeavoured to confine his attention to the subject, but his eyes would wander in the direction of Agnes, who, terrified at emotions which in her mother she had never witnessed before, was kneeling in tears beside her brother.

A strong convulsive shuddering passed over the bowed frame of Isabella of Buchan; then she lifted up her head, and all traces of emotion had passed from her features. Silently she pressed her lips on the fair brows of her children alternately, and her voice faltered not as she bade them rise and heed her not.

"We will speak further of this anon, Sir Robert," she said, so calmly, that the knight started. "Hurried and important as I deem your mission, the day is too far spent to permit of your departure until the morrow; you will honour our evening meal, and this true Scottish tower for a night's lodging, and then we can have leisure for discourse on the weighty matters you have touched upon."

She bowed courteously, as she turned with a slow, unfaltering step to leave the room. Her resumed dignity recalled the bewildered senses of her son, and, with graceful courtesy, he invited the knight to follow him, and choose his lodging for the night.

"Agnes, mine own Agnes, now, indeed, may I win thee," whispered Nigel, as tenderly he folded his arm round her, and looked fondly in her face. "Scotland shall be free! her tyrants banished by her patriot king; and then, then may not Nigel Bruce look to this little hand as his reward? Shall not, may not the thought of thy pure, gentle love be mine, in the tented field and the battle's roar, urging me on, even should all other voice be hushed?"

"Forgettest thou I am a Comyn, Nigel? That the dark stain of traitor, of disloyalty is withering on our line, and wider and wider grows the barrier between us and the Bruce?" The voice of the maiden was choked, her bright eyes dim with tears.

"All, all I do forget, save that thou art mine own sweet love; and though thy name is Comyn, thy heart is all Macduff. Weep not, my Agnes; thine eyes were never framed for tears. Bright times for us and Scotland are yet in store!"

CHAPTER II.

FOR the better comprehension of the events related in the preceding chapter, it will be necessary to cast a summary glance on matters of historical and domestic import no way irrelevant to our subject, save and except their having taken place some few years previous to the commencement of our tale.

The early years of Isabella of Buchan had been passed in happiness. The only daughter, indeed for seven years the only child, of Malcolm Earl of Fife, deprived of her mother on the birth of her brother, her youth had been nursed in a tenderness and care uncommon in those rude ages; and yet, from being constantly with her father, she imbibed those higher qualities of mind which so ably fitted her for the part which in after years it was her lot to play. The last words of his devoted wife, imploring him to educate her child himself, and not to sever the tie between them, by following the example of his compeers, and sending her either to England, France, or Norway, had been zealously observed by the earl; the prosperous calm which was the happy portion of Scotland during the latter years of Alexander III., whose favourite minister he was, enabled him to adhere to her wishes far more successfully than could have been the case had he been called forth to war.

In her father's castle, then, were the first thirteen years of the Lady Isabella spent, varied only by occasional visits to the court of Alexander, where her beauty and vivacity rendered her an universal favourite. Descended from one of the most ancient Scottish families, whose race it was their boast had never been adulterated by the blood of a foreigner, no Norman prejudice intermingled with the education of Isabella, to tarnish in any degree those principles of loyalty and patriotism which her father, the Earl of Fife, so zealously inculcated. She was a more true,

devoted Scottish woman at fourteen, than many of her own rank whose years might double hers ; ready even then to sacrifice even life itself, were it called for in defence of her sovereign, or the freedom of her country ; and when, on the death of Alexander, clouds began to darken the horizon of Scotland, her father scrupled not to impart to her, child though she seemed, those fears and anxieties which clouded his brow, and filled his spirit with foreboding gloom. It was then that in her flashing eye and lofty soul, in the undaunted spirit, which bore awhile even his colder and more foreseeing mood along with it, that he traced the fruit whose seed he had so carefully sown.

“Why should you fear so for Scotland, my father?” she would urge ; “is it because her queen is but a child and now far distant, that anarchy and gloom shall enfold our land ? Is it not shame in ye thus craven to deem her sons, when in thy own breast so much devotion and loyalty have rest ? why not judge others by yourself, my father, and know the dark things of which ye dream can never be ?”

“Thou speakest as the enthusiast thou art, my child. Yet it is not the rule of our maiden queen my foreboding spirit dreads ; 'tis that on such a slender thread as her young life suspends the well-doing or the ruin of her kingdom. If she be permitted to live and reign over us, all may be well ; 'tis on the event of her death for which I tremble.”

“Wait till the evil day cometh then, my father, bring it not nearer by anticipation ; and should indeed such be, thinkest thou not there are bold hearts and loyal souls to guard our land from foreign foe, and give the rightful heir his due ?”

“I know not, Isabella. There remain but few with the pure Scottish blood within their veins, and it is but to them our land is so dear ; they would peril life and limb in her defence. It is not to the proud baron descended from the intruding Norman, and thinking only of his knightly sports and increase of wealth, by it matters not what war. Nor dare we look with confidence to the wild chiefs of the north and the Lords of the Isles ; eager to enlarge their own dominions, to extend the terrors of their name, they will gladly welcome the horrors and confusion that may arise ; and have we true Scottish blood enough to weigh against

these, my child? Alas! Isabella, our only hope is in the health and well-doing of our queen, precarious as that is ; but if she fail us, woe to Scotland ! ”

The young Isabella could not bring forward any solid arguments in answer to this reasoning, and therefore she was silent ; but she felt her Scottish blood throb quicker in her veins, as he spoke of the few pure Scottish men remaining, and inwardly vowed, woman as she was, to devote both energy and life to her country and its sovereign.

Unhappily for his children, though perhaps fortunately for himself, the Earl of Fife was spared the witnessing in the miseries of his country how true had been his forebodings. Two years after the death of his king, he was found dead in his bed, not without strong suspicion of poison. Public rumour pointed to his uncle Macduff of Glamis as the instigator, if not the actual perpetrator of the deed ; but as no decided proof could be alleged against him, and the High Courts of Scotland not seeming inclined to pursue the investigation, the rumour ceased, and Macduff assumed, with great appearance of zeal, the guardianship of the young Earl of Fife and his sister, an office bequeathed to him under the hand and seal of the earl, his nephew.

The character of the Lady Isabella was formed, that of her brother, a child of eight, of course was not ; and the deep, voiceless suffering her father's loss occasioned her individually was painfully heightened, by the idea that to her young brother his death was an infinitely greater misfortune than to herself. He indeed knew not, felt not the agony which bound her ; he knew not the void which was on her soul ; how utterly, unspeakably lonely that heart had become, accustomed as it had been to repose its every thought, and hope, and wish, and feeling on a parent's love ; yet notwithstanding this, her clear mind felt and saw that while for herself there was little fear that she should waver in those principles so carefully instilled, for her brother there was much, very much to dread. She did not and could not repose confidence in her kinsman ; for her parent's sake she struggled to prevent dislike, to compel belief that the suavity, even kindness of his manner, the sentiments which he expressed, had their foundation in sincerity ; but when her young brother became solely and entirely subject to his influence, she could no longer resist

the conviction that their guardian was not the fittest person for the formation of a patriot. She could not, she would not believe the rumour which had once, but once, reached her ears, uniting the hitherto pure line of Macduff with midnight murder; her own noble mind rejected the idea as a thing utterly and wholly impossible, the more so perhaps, as she knew her father had been latterly subject to an insidious disease, baffling all the leech's art, and which he himself had often warned her would terminate suddenly; yet still an inward shuddering would cross her heart at times, when in his presence; she could not define the cause, or why she felt it sometimes and not always, and so she sought to subdue it, but she sought in vain.

Meanwhile an event approached materially connected with the Lady Isabella, and whose consummation the late Thane of Fife had earnestly prayed he might have been permitted to hallow with his blessing. Alexander Comyn, Earl of Buchan and High Constable of Scotland, had been from early youth the brother in arms and dearest friend of the Earl of Fife, and in the romantic enthusiasm which ever characterised the companionship of chivalry, they had exchanged a mutual vow that in after years, should heaven grant them children, a yet nearer and dearer tie should unite their houses. The birth of Isabella, two years after that of an heir to Buchan, was hailed with increased delight by both fathers, and from her earliest years she was accustomed to look to the Lord John as her future husband. Perhaps had they been much thrown together, Isabella's high and independent spirit would have rebelled against this wish of her father, and preferred the choosing for herself, but from the ages of eleven and nine they had been separated, the Earl of Buchan sending his son, much against the advice of his friend, to England, imagining that there, and under such a knight as Prince Edward, he would better learn the noble art of war and all chivalric duties, than in the more barbarous realm of Scotland. To Isabella, then, her destined husband was a stranger, yet with a heart too young and unsophisticated to combat her parent's wishes, by any idea of its affections becoming otherwise engaged, and judging of the son by the father, to whom she was ever a welcome guest, and who in himself was indeed a noble example of chivalry and honour, Isabella neither felt nor expressed

any repugnance to her father's wish, that she should sign her name to a contract of bethrothal, drawn up by the venerable abbot of Buchan, and to which the name of Lord John had been already appended; it was the lingering echoes of that deep yet gentle voice blessing her compliance to his wishes which thrilled again and again to her heart, softening her grief, even when that beloved voice was hushed for ever, and she had no thought, no wish to recall that promise, nay, even looked to its consummation with joy, as a release from the companionship, nay, as at times she felt, the wardance of her kinsman.

But this calm and happy frame of mind was not permitted to be of long continuance. In one of the brief intervals of Macduff's absence from the castle, about eighteen months after her father's death, the young earl prevailed on the aged retainer in whose charge he had been left, to consent to his going forth to hunt the red deer, a sport of which, boy as he was, he was passionately fond. In joyous spirits, and attended by a gallant train, he set out, calling for and receiving the ready sympathy of his sister, who rejoiced as himself in his emancipation from restraint, which either was or seemed to be adverse to the usual treatment of noble youths.

Somewhat sooner than Isabella anticipated, they returned. Earl Duncan, with a wilfulness which already characterised him, weary of the extreme watchfulness of his attendants, who, in their anxiety to keep him from danger, checked and interfered with his boyish wish to signalize himself by some daring deed of agility and skill, at length separated himself, except from one or two as wilful and but little older than himself. The young lord possessed all the daring of his race, but skill and foresight he needed greatly, and dearly would he have paid for his rashness. A young and fiery bull had chanced to cross his path, and disregarding the entreaties of his followers, he taunted them with cowardice, and goaded the furious animal to the encounter; too late he discovered that he had neither skill nor strength for the combat he had provoked, and had it not been for the strenuous exertion of a stranger youth, who diverted aside the fury of the beast, he must have fallen a victim to his thoughtless daring. Curiously and almost enviously he watched the combat between the stranger and the bull,

nor did any emotion of gratitude rise in the boy's breast to soften the bitterness with which he regarded the victory of the former, which the reproaches of his retainers, who at that instant came up, and their condemnation of his folly, did not tend to diminish; and almost sullenly he passed to the rear, on their return, leaving Sir Malise Duff to make the acknowledgements, which should have come from him, and courteously invite the young stranger to accompany them home, an invitation which, somewhat to the discomposure of Earl Duncan, was accepted.

If the stranger had experienced any emotion of anger from the boy's slight of his services, the gratitude of the Lady Isabella would have banished it on the instant, and amply repaid them; with cheeks glowing, eyes glistening, and a voice quivering with suppressed emotion, she had spoken her brief yet eloquent thanks, and had he needed further proof, the embrace she lavished on her young brother, as reluctantly, and after a long interval, he entered the hall, said yet more than her broken words.

"Thou art but a fool, Isabella, craving thy pardon," was his ungracious address, as he sullenly freed himself from her. "Had I brought thee the bull's horns, there might have been some cause for this marvellously warm welcome, but as it is—"

"I joy thou wert not punished for thy rashness, Duncan. Yet 'twas not in such mood I hoped to find thee; knowest thou that 'tis to yon brave stranger thou owest thy life?"

"Better it had been forfeited, than that he should stand between me and mine honour. I thank him not for it, nor owe him aught like gratitude."

"Peace, ungrateful boy, an' thou knowest not thy station better," was his sister's calm yet dignified reply; and the stranger smiled, and by his courteous manner, speedily dismissed her fears as to the impression of her brother's words, regarding them as the mere petulance of a child.

Days passed, and still the stranger lingered; eminently handsome, his carriage peculiarly graceful, and even dignified, although it was evident, from the slight and as it were unfinished roundness of his figure, that he was but in the first stage of youth, yet his discourse and manner were of a kind that would bespeak him noble, even had his

appearance been less convincing. According to the custom of the time, which would have deemed the questioning a guest as to his name and family a breach of all the rules of chivalry and hospitality, he remained unknown.

"Men call me Sir Robert, though I have still my spurs to win," he had once said, laughingly, to Lady Isabella and her kinsman Sir Malise Duff, "but I would not proclaim my birth till I may bring it honour."

A month passed ere their guest took his departure, leaving regard and regret behind him, in all perhaps save in the childish breast of Earl Duncan, whose sullen manner had never changed. There was a freshness and light-heartedness, and a wild spirit of daring gallantry about the stranger that fascinated, men scarce knew wherefore; a reckless independence of sentiment which charmed, from the utter absence of all affectation which it comprised. To all, save to the Lady Isabella, he was a mere boy; younger even than his years, but in conversation with her, his superior mind shone forth, proving he could in truth appreciate hers, and give back intellect for intellect, feeling for feeling; perhaps her beauty and unusual endowments had left their impression upon him. However it may be, one day, one little day, after the departure of Sir Robert, Isabella woke to the consciousness that the calm which had so long rested on her spirit had departed, and for ever; and to what had it given place—had she dared to love, she, the betrothed, the promised bride of another? No; she could not have sunk thus low, her heart had been too long controlled to rebel now. She might not, she would not listen to its voice, to its wild impassioned throbs. Alas! she miscalculated her own power; the fastnesses she had deemed secure were forced; they closed upon their subtle foe, and held their conqueror prisoner.

But Isabella was not one to waver in a determination when once formed; how might she break asunder links which the dead had hallowed. She became the bride of Lord John; she sought with her whole soul to forget the past, and love him according to her bridal vow, and as time passed, she ceased to think of that beautiful vision of her early youth, save as a dream that had had no resting; and a mother's fond yearnings sent their deep delicious sweetness as oil on the troubled waters of her heart. She

might have done this, but unhappily she too soon discovered her husband was not one to aid her in her unsuspected task, to soothe and guide, and by his affection demand her gratitude and reverence. Enwrapped in selfishness or haughty indifference, his manner towards her ever harsh, unbending, and suspicious, Isabella's pride would have sustained her, had not her previous trial lowered her in self-esteem; but as it was, meekly and silently she bore with the continued outbreak of unrestrained passion, and never wavered from the path of duty her clear mind had laid down.

On the birth of a son, however, her mind regained its tone, and inwardly yet solemnly she vowed that no mistaken sense of duty to her husband should interfere with the education of her son. As widely opposed as were their individual characters, so were the politics of the now Earl and Countess of Buchan. Educated in England, on friendly terms with her king, he had, as the Earl of Fife anticipated, lost all nationality, all interest in Scotland, and as willingly and unconcernedly taken the vows of homage to John Baliol, as the mere representative and lieutenant of Edward, as he would have done to a free and unlimited king. He had been among the very first to vote for calling in the King of England as umpire; the most eager to second and carry out all Edward's views, and consequently high in that monarch's favour, a reputation which his enmity to the house of Bruce, one of the most troublesome competitors of the crown, did not tend to diminish. Fortunately perhaps for Isabella, the bustling politics of her husband constantly divided them. The births of a daughter and son had no effect in softening his hard and selfish temper; he looked on them more as incumbrances than pleasures, and leaving the Countess in the strong Tower of Buchan, he himself, with a troop of armed and mounted Comyns, attached himself to the court and interests of Edward, seeming to forget that such beings as a wife and children had existence. Months, often years, would stretch between the earl's visits to his mountain home, and then a week was the longest period of his lingering; but no evidence of a gentler spirit or of less indifference to his children was apparent, and years seemed to have turned to positive evil, qualities which in youth had merely seemed unamiable.

Desolate as the situation of the countess might perhaps appear, she found solace and delight in moulding the young minds of her children according to the pure and elevated cast of her own. All the long-suppressed tenderness of her nature was lavished upon them, and on their innocent love she sought to rest the passionate yearnings of her own. She taught them to be patriots, in the purest, most beautiful appropriation of the term,—to spurn the yoke of the foreigner, and the oppressor, however light and flowery the links of that yoke might seem. She could not bid them love and revere their father as she longed to do, but she taught them that where their duty to their country and their free and unchained king interfered not, in all things they must obey and serve their father, and seek to win his love.

Once only had the Countess of Buchan beheld the vision which had crossed her youth. He had come, it seemed unconscious of his track, and asked hospitality for a night, evidently without knowing who was the owner of the castle; perhaps his thoughts were preoccupied, for a deep gloom was on his brow, and though he had started with evident pleasure when recognising his beautiful hostess, the gloom speedily resumed ascendancy. It was but a few weeks after the fatal battle of Falkirk, and therefore Isabella felt there was cause enough for depression and uneasiness. The grace of boyhood had given place to a finished manliness of deportment, a calmer expression of feature, denoting that years had changed and steadied the character, even as the form. He then seemed as one labouring under painful and heavy thought, as one brooding over some mighty change within, as if some question of weighty import were struggling with recollections and visions of the past. He had spoken little, evidently shrinking in pain from all reference to or information on the late engagement. He tarried not long, departing with dawn next day, and they did not meet again.

And what had been the emotions of the countess? Perhaps her heart had throbbed, and her cheek paled and flushed, at this unexpected meeting with one she had fervently prayed never to see again; but not one feeling obtained ascendancy in that heart which she would have dreaded to unveil to the eye of her husband. She did indeed feel that had

her lot been cast otherwise, it must have been a happy one, but the thought was transient. She was a wife, a mother, and in the happiness of her children, her youth, and all its joys and pangs, and dreams and hopes, were merged, to be recalled no more.

The task of instilling patriotic sentiments in the breasts of her son had been insensibly aided by the countess's independent position amid the retainers of Buchan. This earldom had only been possessed by the family of Comyn since the latter years of the reign of William the Lion, passing into their family by the marriage of Margaret Countess of Buchan with Sir William Comyn, a knight of goodly favour and repute. This interpolation and ascendancy of strangers was a continual source of jealousy and ire to the ancient retainers of the olden heritage, and continually threatened to break out into open feud, had not the soothing policy of the Countess Margaret and her descendants, by continually employing them together in subjecting other petty clans, contrived to keep them in good humour. As long as their lords were loyal to Scotland and her king, and behaved so as to occasion no unpleasant comparison between them and former superiors, all went on smoothly; but the haughty and often outrageous conduct of the present earl, his utter neglect of their interests, his treasonous politics, speedily roused the slumbering fire into flame. A secret yet solemn oath went round the clan, by which every fighting man bound himself to rebel against their master, rather than betray their country by siding with a foreign tyrant; to desert their homes, their all, and disperse singly midst the fastnesses and rocks of Scotland, than lift up a sword against her freedom. The sentiments of the countess were very soon discovered; and even yet stronger than the contempt and loathing with which they looked upon the earl, was the love, the veneration they bore to her and to her children. If his mother's lips had been silent, the youthful heir would have learned loyalty and patriotism from his brave though unlettered retainers, as it was to them he owed the skill and grace with which he sate his fiery steed, and poised his heavy lance, and wielded his stainless brand—to them he owed all the chivalric accomplishments of the day; and though he had never quitted the territories of Buchan, he would have

found few to compete with him in his high and gallant spirit.

Dark and troubled was the political aspect of unhappy Scotland, at the eventful period at which our tale commences. The barbarous and most unjust execution of Sir William Wallace had struck the whole country as with a deadly panic, from which it seemed there was not one to rise to cast aside the heavy chains, whose weight it seemed had crushed the whole kingdom, and taken from it the last gleams of patriotism and of hope. Every fortress of strength and consequence was in possession of the English. English soldiers, English commissioners, English judges, laws, and regulations now filled and governed Scotland. The abrogation of all those ancient customs, which had descended from the Celts and Picts and Scots, fell upon the hearts of all true Scottish men as the tearing asunder the last links of freedom, and branding them as slaves. Her principal nobles, strangely and traitorously, preferred safety and wealth, in the acknowledgement and servitude of Edward, to glory and honour in the service of their country; and the spirits of the middle ranks yet spurned the inglorious yoke, and throbbed but for one to lead them on, if not to victory, at least to an honourable death. That one seemed not to rise; it was as if the mighty soul of Scotland had departed, when Wallace slept in death.

CHAPTER III.

A BUSTLING and joyous aspect did the ancient town of Scone present near the end of March, 1306. Subdued indeed, and evidently under some restraint and mystery, which might be accounted for by the near vicinity of the English, who were quartered in large numbers over almost the whole of Perthshire; some, however, appeared exempt from these most unwelcome guests. The nobles, esquires, yeomen, and peasants—all, by their national garb and eager yet suppressed voices, might be known at once as Scotsmen right and true.

It had been long, very long since the old quiet town

had witnessed such busy groups and such eager tongues as on all sides thronged it now; the very burghers and men of handicraft wore on their countenances tokens of something momentous. There were smiths' shops opening on every side, armourers at work, anvils clanging, spears sharpening, shields burnishing, bits and steel saddles and sharp spurs meeting the eye at every turn. Ever and anon, came a burst of enlivening music, and well mounted and gallantly attired, attended by some twenty or fifty followers, as may be, would gallop down some knight or noble, his armour flashing back a hundred fold the rays of the setting sun; his silken pennon displayed, the device of which seldom failed to excite a hearty cheer from the excited crowds; his stainless shield and heavy spear borne by his attendant esquires; his vizor up, as if he courted and dared recognition; his surcoat, curiously and tastefully embroidered; his gold or silver-sheathed and hilted sword suspended by the silken sash of many folds and brilliant colouring. On foot or on horseback, these noble cavaliers were continually passing and repassing the ancient streets, singly or in groups; then there were their followers, all carefully and strictly armed, in the buff coat plaited with steel, the well-quilted bonnet, the huge broadsword; Highlanders in their peculiar and graceful costume; even the stout farmers, who might also be found amongst this motly assemblage, wearing the iron hauberk and sharp sword beneath their apparently peaceful garb. Friars in their grey frocks and black cowls, and stately burghers and magistrates, in their velvet cloaks and gold chains, continually mingled their peaceful forms with their more warlike brethren, and lent a yet more varied character to the stirring picture.

Varied as were the features of this moving multitude, the expression on every countenance, noble and follower, yeoman and peasant, burgher and even monk, was invariably the same — a species of strong yet suppressed excitement, sometimes shaded by anxiety, sometimes lighted by hope, almost amounting to triumph; sometimes the dark frown of scorn and hate would pass like a thunder-cloud over noble brows, and the mailed hand unconsciously clutched the sword; and then the low, thrilling laugh of derisive contempt would disperse the shade, and the muttered oath of vengeance drown the voice of execra-

tion. It would have been a strange yet mighty study, the face of man in that old town ; but men were all too much excited to observe their fellows, to them it was enough—unspoken, unimparted wisdom as it was—to know, to feel, one common feeling bound that varied mass of men, one mighty interest made them brothers.

The ancient Palace of Scone, so long unused, was now evidently the head-quarters of the noblemen hovering about the town, for whatever purpose they were there assembled. The heavy flag of Scotland, in all its massive quartering, as the symbol of a free, unfettered kingdom, waved from the centre tower ; archers and spearmen lined the courts, sentinels were at their posts, giving and receiving the watchword from all who passed and repassed the heavy gates, which from dawn till nightfall were flung wide open, as if the inmates of that regal dwelling were ever ready to receive their friends, and feared not the approach of foes.

The sun, though sinking, was still bright, when the slow and dignified approach of the venerable abbot of Scone occasioned some stir and bustle amidst the joyous occupants of the palace yard ; the wild joke was hushed, the noisy brawl subsided, the games of quoit and hurling the bar awhile suspended, and the silence of unaffected reverence awaited the good old man's approach and kindly-given benison on one within. Leaving his attendants in one of the lower rooms, the abbot proceeded up the massive stone staircase, and along a broad and lengthy passage, darkly panelled with thick oak, then pushing aside some heavy arras, stood within one of the state chambers, and gave his fervent benison on one within. This was a man in the earliest and freshest prime of life, that period uniting all the grace and beauty of youth with the mature thought, and steady wisdom, and calmer views of manhood. That he was of noble birth, and blood, and training, one glance sufficed ; peculiarly and gloriously distinguished in the quiet majesty of his figure, in the mild attempered gravity of his commanding features. Nature herself seemed to have marked him out for the distinguished part it was his to play. Already there were lines of thought upon the clear and open brow, and round the mouth ; and the blue eye shone with that calm, steady lustre, which seldom comes till the changeful fire and wild visions of dreamy youth have

departed. His hair, of rich and glossy brown, fell in loose natural curls on either side his face, somewhat lower than his throat, shading his cheeks, which, rather pale than otherwise, added to the somewhat grave aspect of his countenance; his armour of steel, richly and curiously inlaid with burnished gold, sat lightly and easily upon his peculiarly tall and manly figure; a sash, of azure silk and gold, suspended his sword, whose sheath was in unison with the rest of his armour, though the hilt was studded with gems. His collar was also of gold, as were his gauntlets, which with his helmet rested on a table near him; a coronet of plain gold surmounted his helmet, and on his surcoat, which lay on a seat at the farther end of the room, might be discerned the rampant lion of Scotland, surmounted by a crown.

The apartment in which he stood, though shorn of much of that splendour which, ere the usurping invasion of Edward of England, had distinguished it, still bore evidence of being a chamber of some state. The hangings were of dark green velvet embroidered, and with a very broad fringe of gold; drapery of the same costly material adorned the broad casements, which stood in heavy frames of oak, black as ebony. Large folding-doors, with panels of the same beautiful material, richly carved, opened into an antechamber, and thence to the grand staircase and more public parts of the building. In this antechamber were now assembled pages, esquires, and other officers bespeaking a royal household, though much less numerous than is generally the case.

"Sir Edward and the young Lord of Douglas have not returned, sayest thou, good Athelbert? knowest thou when and for what went they forth?" were the words which were spoken by the noble we have described, as the abbot entered, unperceived at first, from his having avoided the public entrance to the state rooms; they were addressed to an esquire, who, with cap in hand and head somewhat lowered, respectfully awaited the commands of his master.

"They said not the direction of their course, my liege; 'tis thought to reconnoitre either the movements of the English, or to ascertain the cause of the delay of the Lord of Fife. They departed at sunrise, with but few followers."

"On but a useless errand, good Athelbert, methinks, as they hope to greet Earl Duncan, save with a host of English at his back. Bid Sir Edward hither, should he return ere nightfall, and see to the instant delivery of those papers; I fear me, the good lord bishop has waited for them: and stay—Sir Robert Keith, hath he not yet returned?"

"No, good my lord."

"Ha; he tarrieth long," answered the noble, musingly. "Now heaven forefend no evil hath befallen him; but to thy mission, Athelbert, I must not detain thee with doubts and cavil. Ha! reverend father, right welcome," he added, perceiving him as he turned again to the table, on the esquire reverentially withdrawing from his presence, and bending his head humbly in acknowledgement of the abbot's benediction. "Thou findest me busied as usual. Seest thou," he pointed to a rough map of Scotland lying before him, curiously intersected with mystic lines and crosses, "Edinburgh, Berwick, Roxburgh, Lanark, Stirling, Dumbarton, in the power of, nay peopled by English. Argyll on the west, Elgin, Aberdeen, with Banff eastward, teeming with proud, false Scots, hereditary foes to the Bruce, false traitors to their land; the north—why, 'tis the same foul tale; and yet I dare to raise my banner, dare to wear the crown, and fling defiance in the teeth of all. What sayest thou, father—is't not a madman's deed?"

All appearance of gravity vanished from his features as he spoke. His eye, seemingly so mild, flashed till its very colour could not have been distinguished, his cheek glowed, his lip curled, and his voice, ever peculiarly rich and sonorous, deepened with the excitement of soul.

"Were the fate of man in his own hands, were it his and his alone to make or mar his destiny, I should e'en proclaim thee mad, my son, and seek to turn thee from thy desperate purpose; but it is not so. Man is but an instrument, and He who urged thee to this deed, who wills not this poor land to rest enlaved, will give thee strength and wisdom for its freedom. His ways are not as man's; and circled as thou seemest with foes, His strength shall bring thee forth and gird thee with His glory. Thou wouldst not turn aside, my son—thou fearest not thy foes?"

"Fear! holy father, it is a word unknown to the children of the Bruce! I do but smile at mine extensive kingdom — of some hundred acres square; smile at the eagerness with which they greet me liege and king, as if the words, so long unused, should now do double duty for long absence."

"And better so, my son," answered the old man, cheerfully. "Devotion to her destined saviour argues well for bonny Scotland: better do homage unto thee as liege and king, though usurpation hath abridged thy kingdom, than to the hireling of England's Edward, all Scotland at his feet. Men will not kneel to sceptred slaves, nor freemen fight for tyrants' tools. Sovereign of Scotland thou art, thou shalt be, Robert the Bruce! Too long hast thou kept back, but now, if arms can fight and hearts can pray, thou shalt be king of Scotland."

The abbot spoke with a fervour, a spirit which, though perhaps little accordant with his clerical character, thrilled to the Bruce's heart. He grasped the old man's hand.

"Holy father," he said, "thou wouldst inspire hearts with ardour needing inspiration more than mine; and to me thou givest hope, and confidence, and strength. Too long have I slept and dreamed," his countenance darkened, and his voice was sadder; "fickle in purpose, uncertain in accomplishment; permitting my youth to moulder 'neath the blasting atmosphere of tyranny. Yet will I now atone for the neglected past. Atone! aye, banish it from the minds of men. My country hath a claim, a double claim upon me; she calls upon me, trumpet-tongued, to arise, avenge her, and redeem my misspent youth. Nor shall she call on me in vain, so help me, gracious heaven!"

"Amen," fervently responded the abbot, and the king continued more hurriedly—

"And that stain, that blot, father? is there mercy in heaven to wash its darkness from my soul, or must it linger there for ever, preying on my spirit, dashing e'en its highest hopes and noblest dreams with poison, whispering its still voice of accusation, even when loudest rings the praise and love of men? Is there no rest for this, no silence for that whisper? Penitence, atonement, anything thou wilt, let but my soul be free!" Hastily, and with

step and countenance disordered, he traversed the chamber, his expressive countenance denoting the strife within.

"It was, in truth, a rash and guilty deed, my son," answered the abbot, gravely, yet mildly, "and one that heaven in its justice will scarce pass unavenged. Man hath given thee the absolution accorded to the true and faithful penitent, for such thou art; yet scarcely dare we hope offended heaven is appeased. Justice will visit thee with trouble, sore, oppressing, grievous trouble. Yet despair not, thou wilt come forth the purer, nobler, brighter from the fire; despair not, but as a child receive a father's chastening; lean upon that love, which wills not death, but penitence and life; that love, which yet will bring thee forth and bless this land in thee. My son, be comforted; His mercy is yet greater than thy sin."

"And blest art thou, my father, for these *blessed* words; a messenger in truth thou art of peace and love; and oh, if prayers and penitence avail, if sore temptation may be pleaded, I shall, I shall be pardoned. Yet would I give my dearest hopes of life, of fame, of all—save Scotland's freedom—that this evil had not chanced; that blood, his blood—base traitor as he was—was not upon my hand."

"And can it be thou art such craven, Robert, as to repent a Comyn's death—a Comyn, and a traitor—e'en though his dastard blood be on thy hand?—bah! An' such deeds weigh heavy on thy mind, a friar's cowl were better suited to thy brow than Scotland's diadem."

The speaker was a tall, powerful man, somewhat younger in appearance than the king, but with an expression of fierceness and haughty pride, contrasting powerfully with the benevolent and native dignity which so characterised the Bruce. His voice was as harsh as his manner was abrupt; yet that he was brave, nay, rash in his unthinking daring, a very transient glance would suffice to discover.

"I forgive thee thine undeserved taunt, Edward," answered the king, calmly, though the hot blood rushed up to his cheek and brow. "I trust, ere long, to prove thy words are as idle as the mood which prompted them. I feel not that repentance cools the patriot fire which urges me to strike for Scotland's weal—that sorrow for a hated crime unfits me for a warrior. I would not Comyn lived, but that he had met a traitor's fate by other hands than mine; been judged—con-

demned, as his black treachery called for ; even for our country's sake, it had been better thus."

"Thou art over-scrupulous, my liege and brother, and I too hasty," replied Sir Edward Bruce, in the same bold, careless tone. "Yet beshrew me, but I think that in these times a sudden blow and hasty fate the only judgment for a traitor. The miscreant were too richly honoured, that by thy royal hand he fell."

"My son, my son, I pray thee, peace," urged the abbot, in accents of calm yet grave authority. "As minister of heaven, I may not list such words. Bend not thy brow in wrath, clad as thou art in mail, in youthful might ; yet in my Maker's cause this withered frame is stronger yet than thou art. Enough of that which hath been. Thy sovereign spoke in lowly penitence to me—to me, who, frail and lowly unto thee, am yet the minister of Him whom sin offends. To thee he stands a warrior and a king, who rude irreverence may brook not, even from his brother. Be peace between us, then, my son ; an old man's blessing on thy fierce yet knightly spirit rest."

With a muttered oath Sir Edward had strode away at the abbot's first words, but the cloud passed from his brow as he concluded, and slightly yet with something of reverence he bowed his head.

"And whither didst thou wend thy way, my fiery brother ?" demanded Robert. "Bringest thou aught of news, or didst thou and Douglas but set foot in stirrup and hand on rein simply from weariness of quiet ?"

"In sober truth 'twas even so ; partly to mark the movements of the English, an they make a movement, which, till Pembroke come, they are all too much amazed to do ; partly to see if in truth that poltroon Duncan of Fife yet hangs back and still persists in forswearing the loyalty of his ancestors, and leaving to better hands the proud task of placing the crown of Scotland on thy head."

"And thou art convinced at last that such and such only is his intention ?" The knight nodded assent, and Bruce continued, jestingly, "And so thou mightest have been long ago, my sage brother, hadst thou listened to me. I tell thee Earl Duncan hath a spite against me, not for daring to raise the standard of freedom and proclaim myself a king, but for very hatred of myself. Nay, hast thou not seen it thy-

self, when, fellow-soldiers, fellow-seekers of the banquet, tourney, or ball, he hath avoided, shunned me? and why should he seek me now?"

"Why? does not Scotland call him, Scotland bid him gird his sword and don his mail? Will not the dim spectres of his loyal line start from their very tombs to call him to thy side, or brand him traitor and poltroon, with nought of Duff about him but the name? Thou smilest."

"At thy violence, good brother. Duncan of Fife loves better the silken cords of peace and pleasure, e'en though those silken threads hide chains, than the trumpet's voice and weight of mail. In England bred, courted, flattered by her king, 'twere much too sore a trouble to excite his anger and lose his favour; and for whom, for what?—to crown the man he hateth from his soul."

"And knowest thou wherefore, my good son, in what thou hast offended?"

"Offended, holy father? nay, in nought unless perchance a service rendered when a boy—a simple service, merely that of saving life—hath rendered him the touchy fool he is. But hark! who comes?"

The tramping of many horses, mingled with the eager voices of men, resounded from the courtyard as he spoke, and Sir Edward strode hastily to the casement. "Sir Robert Keith returned!" he exclaimed, joyfully; "and seemingly right well attended. Litters too—bah! we want no more women. 'Tis somewhat new for Keith to be a squire of dames. Why, what banner is this? the black bear of Buchan—impossible! the earl is a foul Comyn. I'll to the court, for this passes my poor wits. He turned hastily to quit the chamber, as a youth entered, not without some opposition, it appeared, from the attendants without, but eagerly he had burst through them, and flung his plumed helmet from his beautiful brow, and, after glancing hastily round the room, bounded to the side of Robert, knelt at his feet, and clasped his knees without uttering a syllable, voiceless from an emotion whose index was stamped upon his glowing features.

"Nigel, by all that's marvellous, and as moon-stricken as his wont! Why, where the foul fiend hast thou sprung from? Art dumb, thou foolish boy? By St. Andrew, these are times to act and speak, not think and feel! Whence comest thou?"

So spoke the impatient Edward; to whom the character of his youngest brother had ever been a riddle, which it had been too much trouble to expound, and that which it *seemed* to his too careless thought he ever looked upon with scorn and contempt. Not so King Robert; he raised him affectionately in his arms, and pressed him to his heart.

"Thou'rt welcome, most, most welcome, Nigel; as welcome as unlooked for. But why this quick return from scenes and studies more congenial to thy gentle nature, my young brother? this fettered land is scarce a home for thee; thy free, thy fond imaginings can scarce have resting here." He spoke sadly, and his smile unwittingly was sorrowful.

"And thinkest thou, Robert—nay, forgive me, good my liege—thinkest thou, because I loved the poet's dream, because I turned, in sad and lonely musing, from King Edward's court, I loved the cloister better than the camp? Oh, do me no such wrong, thou knowest not the guidings of my heart; nor needs it now, my sword shall better plead my cause than can my tongue." He turned away deeply and evidently pained, and a half laugh from Sir Edward prevented the king's reply.

"Well crowed, my pretty fledgling," he said, half jesting, half in scorn. "But knowest thou, to fight in very earnest is something different than to read and chant it in a minstrel's lay. Better hie thee back to Florence, boy; the mail suit and crested helm are not for such as thee—better shun them now, than after they are donned."

"How! darest thou, Edward? Edward, tempt me not too far," exclaimed Nigel, his cheek flushing, and springing towards him, his hand upon his half-drawn sword. "By heaven, wert thou not my mother's son, I would compel thee to retract these words, injurious, unjust! How darest thou judge me coward, till my cowardice is proved? Thy blood is not more red than mine."

"Peace, peace! what meaneth this unseemly broil?" said Robert, hastily advancing between them, for the dark features of Edward were lowering in wrath, and Nigel was excited to unwonted fierceness. "Edward, begone! and as thou saidst, see to Sir Robert Keith—what news he brings. Nigel, on thy love, thy allegiance so lately proffered, if I read thy greeting right, I pray thee heed not his taunting

words. I do not doubt thee; 'twas for thy happiness, not thy gallantry, I trembled. Look not thus dejected," he held out his hand, which his brother knelt to salute. "Nay, nay, thou foolish boy, forget my new dignity awhile, and now that rude brawler has departed, tell me in sober wisdom how camest thou here. How didst thou know I might have need of thee?" A quick flush suffused the cheek of the young man; he hesitated, evidently confused. "Why, what ails thee, boy? By St. Andrew, Nigel, I do believe thou hast never quitted Scotland."

"And if I have not, my lord, what wilt thou deem me?"

"A very strangely wayward boy, not knowing his own mind," replied the king, smiling. "But why should I say so? I never asked thy confidence, never sought it, or in any way returned or appreciated thy boyish love, and why should I deem thee wayward, never inquiring into thy projects—passing thee by, perchance, as a wild visionary, much happier than myself?"

"And thou wilt think me yet more a visionary, I fear me, Robert; yet thine interest is too dear to pass unanswered," rejoined Nigel, after glancing round and perceiving they were alone, for the abbot had departed with Sir Edward, seeking to tame his reckless spirit.

"Know, then, to aid me in keeping aloof from the tyrant of my country, whom instinctively I hated, had confined myself to books and such lore yet more than my natural inclination prompted, though that was strong enough—I had made a solemn vow, rather to take the monk's cowl and frock, than receive knighthood from the hand of Edward of England, or raise my sword at his bidding. My whole soul yearned towards the country of my fathers, that country which was theirs by royal right; and when the renown of Wallace reached my ears, when, in my waking and sleeping dreams, I beheld the patriot struggling for freedom, peace, the only one whose arm had struck for Scotland, whose tongue had dared to speak resistance, I longed wildly, intensely, vainly, to burst the thralldom which held my race, and seek for death beneath the patriot banner. I longed, yet dared not. My own death were welcome; but mother, father, brothers, sisters, all were perilled, had I done so. I stood, I deemed, alone in my enthusiast dreams; those I loved best, acknowledged, bowed before the man my very spirit

loathed, and how dared I, a boy, a child, stand forth arraigning and condemning? But wherefore art thou thus, Robert? oh, what has thus moved thee?"

Wrapt in his own earnest words and thoughts, Nigel had failed until that moment to perceive the effect of his words upon his brother. Robert's head had sunk upon his hand, and his whole frame shook beneath some strong emotion; evidently striving to subdue it, some moments elapsed ere he could reply, and then only in accents of bitter self-reproach. "Why, why did not such thoughts come to me, instead of thee?" he said. "My youth had not wasted then in idle folly—worse, oh worse—in slavish homage, coward indecision; flitting like the moth around the destructive flame; and while I deemed thee buried in romantic dreams, all a patriot's blood was rushing in thy veins, while mine was dull and stagnant."

"But to flow forth the brighter, my own brother," interrupted Nigel, earnestly. "Oh, I have watched thee, studied thee, even as I loved thee, long; and I have hoped, felt, *known* that this day would dawn; that thou *wouldst* rise for Scotland, and she would rise for thee. Ah, now thou smilest as thyself, and I will to my tale. The patriot died—let me not utter how; no Scottish tongue should speak those words, save with the upraised arm and trumpet shout of vengeance! I could not rest in England then; I could not face the tyrant who dared proclaim and execute as traitor the noblest hero, purest patriot, that ever walked this earth. But men said I sought the lyric schools, the poet's haunts in Provence, and I welcomed the delusion; but it was to Scotland that I came, unknown, and silently to mark if with her Wallace all life and soul had fled. I saw enough to know that were there but a fitting head, her hardy sons would struggle yet for freedom—but not yet; that chief art thou, and at the close of the last year I took passage to Denmark, intending to rest there till Scotland called me."

"And 'tis thence thou comest, Nigel? Can it be, intelligence of my movements hath reached so far north already?" inquired the king, somewhat surprised at the abruptness of his brother's pause.

"Not so, my liege. The vessel which bore me was wrecked off the breakers of Buchan, and cast me back

again to the arms of Scotland. I found hospitality, shelter, kindness; nay more, were this a time and place to speak, of happy, trusting love," he added, turning away from the Bruce's penetrating eye, "and week after week passed, and found me still an inmate of the Tower of Buchan."

"Buchan?" interrupted the king, hastily; "the castle of a Comyn, and thou speakest of love."

"Of as true, as firm-hearted a Scottish patriot, my liege, as ever lived in the heart of woman—one that has naught of Comyn about her or her fair children but the name, as speedily thou wilt have proof. But in good time is my tale come to a close, for hither comes good Sir Robert and other noble knights, who, by their eager brows, methinks, have matters of graver import for thy grace's ear."

They entered as he spoke. The patriot nobles who, at the first call of their rightful king, had gathered round his person, few in number, yet firm in heart, ready to lay down fame, fortune, life beside his standard, rather than acknowledge the foreign foe, who, setting aside all principles of knightly honour, knightly faith, sought to claim their country as his own, their persons as his slaves. Eager was the greeting of each and all to the youthful Nigel, mingled with some surprise. Their conference with the king was but brief, and as it comprised matters more of speculation than of decided import, we will pass on to a later period of the same evening.

CHAPTER IV.

"BUCHAN! the Countess of Buchan, sayest thou, Athelbert? nay, 'tis scarce possible," said a fair and noble-looking woman, still in the bloom of life, though early youth had passed, pausing on her way to the queen's apartment, to answer some information given by the senior page.

"Indeed, madam, 'tis even so; she arrived but now, escorted by Sir Robert Keith and his followers, in addition to some fifty of the retainers of Buchan."

"And hath she lodging within the palace?"

"Yes madam; an' it please you, I will conduct you to her, 'tis but a step beyond the royal suite."

She made him a sign of assent, and followed him slowly, as if musingly.

"It is strange, it is very strange," she thought, "yet scarcely so; she was ever in heart and soul a patriot, nor has she seen enough of her husband to change such sentiments. Yet, for her own sake, perchance it had been better had she not taken this rash step; 'tis a desperate game we play, and the fewer lives and fortunes wrecked the better."

Her cogitations were interrupted by hearing her name announced in a loud voice by the page, and finding herself in presence of the object of her thoughts.

"Isabella, dearest Isabella, 'tis even thine own dear self. I deemed the boy's tale well-nigh impossible," was her hasty exclamation, as with a much quicker step she advanced towards the countess, who met her half-way, and warmly returned her embrace, saying as she did so—

"This is kind, indeed, dearest Mary, to welcome me so soon; 'tis long, long years since we have met; but they have left as faint a shadow on thy affections as on mine."

"Indeed, thou judgest me truly, Isabella. Sorrow, methinks, doth but soften the heart and render the memory of young affections, youthful pleasures, the more vivid, the more lasting: we think of what we have been, or what we are, and the contrast heightens into perfect bliss that which at the time, perchance, we deemed but perishable joy."

"Hast thou too learnt such lesson, Mary? I hoped its lore was all unknown to thee."

"It was, indeed, deferred so long, so blessedly, I dared to picture perfect happiness on earth; but since my husband's hateful captivity, Isabella, there can be little for his wife but anxiety and dread. But these—are these thine?" she added, gazing admiringly and tearfully on Agnes and Alan, who had at their mother's sign advanced from the embrasure, where they had held low yet earnest converse, and gracefully acknowledged the stranger's notice. "Oh, wherefore bring them here, my friend?"

"Wherefore, lady?" readily and impetuously answered Alan; "art thou a friend of Isabella of Buchan, and asketh wherefore? Where our sovereign is, should not his subjects be?"

"Thy mother's friend and sovereign's sister, noble boy, and yet I grieve to see thee here. The Bruce is but in

name a king, uncrowned as yet and unanointed. His kingdom bounded by the confines of this one fair county, struggling for every acre at the bright sword's point."

"The greater glory for his subjects, lady," answered the youth. "The very act of proclaiming himself king removes the chains of Scotland, and flings down her gage. Fear not, he shall be king ere long in something more than name."

"And is it thus a Comyn speaks?" said the Lady Campbell. "Ah, were the idle feuds of petty minds thus laid at rest, bold boy, thy dreams might e'en be truth; but knowest thou, young man—knowest thou, Isabella, the breach between the Comyn and the Bruce is widened, and, alas! by blood?"

"Aye, lady; but what boots it? A traitor should have no name, no kin, or those who bear that name should wash away their race's stain by nobler deeds of loyalty and valour."

"It would be well did others think with thee," replied Lady Campbell; "yet I fear me in such sentiments the grandson of the loyal Fife will stand alone. Isabella, dearest Isabella," she added, laying her hand on the arm of the countess, and drawing her away from her children, "hast thou done well in this decision? hast thou listened to the calmer voice of prudence as was thy wont? hast thou thought on all the evils thou mayest draw upon thy head, and upon these, so lovely and so dear?"

"Mary, I have thought, weighed, pondered, and yet I am here," answered the countess, firmly, yet in an accent that still bespoke some inward struggle. "I know, I feel, all, all that thou wouldst urge; that I am exposing my brave boy to death, perchance by a father's hand, bringing him hither to swear fealty, to raise his sword for the Bruce, in direct opposition to my husband's politics, still more to his will; yet, Mary, there are mutual duties between a parent and a child. My poor boy has ever from his birth been fatherless. No kindly word, no glowing smile has ever met his infancy, his boyhood. He scarce can know his father—the love, the reverence of a son it would have been such joy to teach. Left to my sole care, could I instil sentiments other than those a father's lips bestowed on me? Could I instruct him in aught save love, devotion to his

country, to her rights, to her king? I have done this so gradually, my friend, that for the burst of loyalty, of impetuous gallantry, which answered Sir Robert Keith's appeal, I was well-nigh unprepared. My father, my noble father breathes in my boy; and oh, Mary, better, better far lose him on the battle-field, struggling for Scotland's freedom, glorying in his fate, rejoicing, blessing me for lessons I have taught, than see him, as my husband, as my brother—alas! alas! that I should live to say it—cringing as slaves before the footstool of a tyrant and oppressor. Had he sought it, had he loved—treated me as a wife, Mary, I would have given my husband all—all a woman's duty—all, save the dictates of my soul, but even this he trampled on, despised, rejected; and shall I, dare I then forget, oppose, the precepts of that noble heart, that patriot spirit which breathed into mine the faint reflection of itself?—offend the dead, the hallowed dead, my father—the heart that loved me?"

She paused, in strong, and for the moment overpowering, emotion. The clear, rich tones had never faltered till she spoke of him beloved even in death—faltering not, even when she spoke of death as the portion of her child; it was but the quivering of lip and eye by which the anguish of that thought could have been ascertained. Lady Campbell clasped her hand.

"Thou hast in very truth silenced me, my Isabella," she said; "there is no combating with thoughts as these. Thine is still the same noble soul, exalted mind that I knew in youth: sorrow and time have had no power on these."

"Save to chasten and to purify, I trust," rejoined the countess, in her own calm tone. "Thrown back upon my own strength, it must have gathered force, dear Mary, or have perished altogether. But thou speakest, methinks, but too despondingly of our sovereign's prospects—are they indeed so desperate?"

"Desperate, indeed, Isabella. Even his own family, with the sole exception of that rash madman, Edward, must look upon it thus. How thinkest thou Edward of England will brook this daring act of defiance, of what he will deem rank apostasy and traitorous rebellion? Aged, infirm as he is now, he will not permit this bold attempt to pass unpunished. The whole strength of England will be gathered

together, and pour its devastating fury on this devoted land. And what to this has Robert to oppose? Were he undisputed sovereign of Scotland, we might, without cowardice, be permitted to tremble, threatened as he is; but confined, surrounded by English, with scarce a town or fort to call his own, his enterprise is madness, Isabella, patriotic as it may be."

"Oh, do not say so, Mary. Has he not some noble barons already by his side? will not, nay, is not Scotland rising to support him? hath he not the hearts, the prayers, the swords of all whose mountain homes and freeborn rights are dearer than the yoke of Edward? and hath he not, if rumour speaks aright, within himself a host—not mere valour alone, but prudence, foresight, military skill—all, all that marks a general?"

"As rumour speaks. Thou dost not know him, then," inquired Lady Campbell.

"How could I, dearest? Hast thou forgotten thy anxiety that we should meet, when we were last together, holding at nought, in thy merry mood, my betrothment to Lord John—that I should turn him from his wandering ways, and make him patriotic as myself? Thou seest, Mary, thy brother needed not such influence."

"Of a truth, no," answered her friend; "for his present partner is a very contrast to thyself, and would rather, by her weak and trembling fears, dissuade him from his purpose than inspire and encourage him. Well do I remember that fancy of my happy childhood, and still I wish it had been so, all idle as it seems—strange that ye never met."

"Nay, save thyself, Mary, thy family resided more in England than in Scotland, and for the last seventeen years the territory of Buchan has been my only home, with little interruption to my solitude; yet I have heard much of late of the Earl of Carrick, and from whom thinkest thou?—thou canst not guess—even from thy noble brother Nigel."

"Nigel!" repeated Lady Mary, much surprised.

"Even so, sweet sister, learning dearer lore and lovelier tales than even Provence could instil; 'tis not the land, it is the *heart* where poesie dwells," rejoined Nigel Bruce, gaily advancing from the side of Agnes, where he had been lingering the greater part of the dialogue between his sister and the countess, and now joined them. "Aye, Mary,"

he continued, tenderly, "my own land is dearer than the land of song."

"And dear art thou to Scotland, Nigel ; but I knew not thy fond dreams and wild visions could find resting amid the desert crags and barren plains of Buchan."

"Yet have we not been idle. Dearest Agnes, wilt thou not speak for me? the viol hath not been mute, nor the fond harp unstrung ; and deeper, dearer lessons have thy lips instilled, than could have flowed from fairest lips and sweetest songs of Provence. Nay, blush not, dearest. Mary, thou must love this gentle girl," he added, as he led her forward, and laid the hand of Agnes in his sister's.

"Is it so? then may we indeed be united, though not as I in my girlhood dreamed, my Isabella," said Lady Campbell, kindly parting the clustering curls, and looking fondly on the maiden's blushing face. She was about to speak again, when steps were heard along the corridor, and unannounced, unattended, save by the single page who drew aside the hangings, King Robert entered. He had doffed the armour in which we saw him first, for a plain yet rich suit of dark green velvet, cut and slashed with cloth of gold, and a long mantle of the richest crimson, secured at his throat by a massive golden clasp, from which gleamed the glistening rays of a large emerald ; a brooch of precious stones, surrounded by diamonds, clasped the white ostrich feather in his cap, and the shade of the drooping plume, heightened perhaps by the advance of evening, somewhat obscured his features, but there was that in his majestic mien, in the noble yet dignified bearing, which could not for one moment be mistaken ; and it needed not the word of Nigel to cause the youthful Alan to spring from the couch where he had listlessly thrown himself, and stand, suddenly silenced and abashed.

"My liege and brother," exclaimed Lady Campbell, eagerly, as she hastily led forward the Countess of Buchan, who sunk at once on her knee, overpowered by the emotion of a patriot, thinking only of her country, only of her sovereign, as one inspired by heaven to attempt her rescue, and give her freedom. "How glad am I that it has fallen on me to present to your grace, in the noble Countess of Buchan, the chosen friend of my girlhood, the only descendant of the line of Macduff worthy to bear that name.

Allied as unhappily she is to the family of Comyn, yet still, still most truly, gloriously, a patriot and loyal subject of your grace, as her being here, with all she holds most dear, most precious upon earth, will prove far better than her friend's poor words."

"Were they most rich in eloquence, Mary, believe me, we yet should need them not, in confirmation of this most noble lady's faithfulness and worth," answered the king, with ready courtesy, and in accents that were only too familiar to the ear of Isabella. She started, and gazed up for the first time, seeing fully the countenance of the sovereign. "Rise, lady, we do beseech you, rise; we are not yet so familiar with the forms of royalty as to behold without some shame a noble lady at our feet. Nay, thou art pale, very pale; thy coming hither hath been too rapid, too hurried for thy strength, methinks; I do beseech you, sit." Gently he raised her, and leading her gallantly to one of the cumbrous couches near them, placed her upon it, and sat down beside her. "Ha! that is well; thou art better now. Knowest thou, Mary, thine office would have been more wisely performed, hadst thou presented *me* to the Countess of Buchan, not her to me."

"Thou speakest darkly, good my liege, yet I joy to see thee thus jestingly inclined."

"Nay, 'tis no jest, fair sister; the Countess of Buchan and I have met before, though she knew me but as a wild, heedless stripling first, and a moody, discontented soldier afterwards. I owe thee much, gentle lady; much for the night's lodging thy hospitality bestowed, though at the time my mood was such it had no words of courtesy, no softening fancy, even to thyself; much for the kindness thou didst bestow, not only then but when fate first threw us together; and therefore do I seek thee, lady—therefore would I speak to thee, as the friend of former years, not as the sovereign of Scotland, and as such received by thee." He spoke gravely, with somewhat of sadness in his rich voice. Perhaps it was well for the countess no other answer than a grateful bow was needed, for the sudden faintness which had withdrawn the colour from her cheek yet lingered, sufficient to render the exertion of speaking painful.

"Yet pause one moment, my liege," said Nigel, play-

fully leading Alan forward ; "give me one moment, ere you fling aside your kingly state. Here is a young soldier, longing to rush into the very thickest of a fight that may win a golden spur and receive knighthood at your grace's hand ; a doughty spokesman, who was to say a marvellously long speech of duty, homage, and such like, but whose tongue at sight of thee has turned traitor to its cause. Have mercy on him, good my liege ; I'll answer that his arm is less a traitor than his tongue."

"We do not doubt it, Nigel, and will accept thy words for his. Be satisfied, young sir, the willing homage of all true men is precious to King Robert. And thou, fair maiden, wilt thou, too, follow thy monarch's fortunes, cloudy though they seem ? we read thine answer in thy blushing cheek, and thus we thank thee, maiden."

He threw aside his plumed cap, and gallantly yet respectfully saluted the fair, soft cheek ; confused yet pleased, Agnes looked doubtingly towards Nigel, who, smiling a happy, trusting, joyous smile, led her a few minutes apart, whispered some fond words, raised her hand to his lips, and summoning Alan, they left the room together.

"Sir Robert Keith informs me, noble lady," said the king, again addressing Isabella, "that it is your determination to represent in your own proper person the ancient line of Duff at the approaching ceremony, and demand from our hands, as such representative, the privilege, granted by King Malcolm to your noble ancestor and his descendants, of placing on the sovereign's brow the coronet of Scotland. Is it not so ?"

"I do indeed most earnestly demand this privilege, my gracious liege," answered the countess, firmly ; "demand it as a right, a glorious right, made mine by the weak and fickle conduct of my brother. Alas ! the only male descendant of that line which until now hath never known a traitor."

"But hast thou well considered, lady ? There is danger in this act, danger even to thyself."

"My liege, that there is danger threatening all the patriots of Scotland, monarch or serf, male or female, I well know ; yet in what does it threaten me more in this act, than in the mere acknowledgement of the Earl of Carrick as my sovereign ?"

"It will excite the rage of Edward of England against thyself individually, lady; I know him well, only too well. All who join in giving countenance and aid to my inauguration will be proclaimed, hunted, placed under the ban of traitors, and, if unfortunately taken, will in all probability share the fate of Wallace." His voice became husky with strong emotion. "There is no exception in his sweeping tyranny; youth and age, noble and serf, of either sex, of either land, if they raise the sword for Bruce and freedom, will fall by the hangman's cord or headsman's axe; and I, alas! must look on and bear, for I have neither men nor power to avert such fate; and that hand which places on my head the crown, death, death, a cruel death, will be the doom of its patriot owner. Think, think on this, and oh, retract thy noble resolution, ere it be too late."

"Is she who gives the crown in greater danger, good my liege, than he who wears it?" demanded the countess, with a calm and quiet smile.

"Nay," he answered, smiling likewise for the moment, "but I were worse than traitor, did I shrink from Scotland in her need, and refuse her diadem, in fear, forsooth, of death at Edward's hands. No! I have held back too long, and now will I not turn back till Scotland's freedom is achieved, or Robert Bruce lies with the slain. Repentance for the past, hope, ambition for the future; a firm heart and iron frame, a steady arm and sober mood, to meet the present—I have these, sweet lady, to fit and nerve me for the task, but not such hast thou. I doubt not thy patriot soul; perchance 'twas thy lip that first awoke the slumbering fire within my own breast, and though awhile forgotten, recalled, when again I looked on thee, after Falkirk's fatal battle, with the charge, the solemn charge of Wallace yet ringing in mine ears. Yet, lady, noble lady, tempt not the fearful fate which, shouldst thou fall into Edward's hands, I know too well will be thine own. I dare not promise sure defence from his o'erwhelming hosts, on every side they compass me. I see sorrow and death for all I love, all who swear fealty to me. I shall succeed in the end, for heaven, just heaven will favour the righteous cause; but trouble and anguish must be my lot ere then, and I would save those I can. Remain with us as thou wilt, gratefully I accept the homage so nobly and un-

hesitatingly tendered ; but still I beseech thee, lady, expose not thy noble self to the blind wrath of Edward, as thou surely wilt, if from thy hand I receive my country's crown."

"My liege," answered the countess, in that same calm quiet tone, "I have heard thee with a deep grateful sense of the noble feeling, the kindly care which dictates thy words, yet pardon me, if they fail to shake my resolution—a resolution not lightly formed, not the mere excitement of a patriotic moment, but one based on the principles of years, on the firm, solemn conviction, that in taking this sacred office on myself the voice of the dead is obeyed, the memory of the dead, the noble dead, preserved from stain, inviolate and pure. Would my father have kept aloof in such an hour—refused to place on the brow of Scotland's patriot king, the diadem of his forefathers—held back in fear of Edward? Oh! would that his iron hand and loyal heart were here instead of mine; gladly would I lay me down in his cold home and place him at thy side, might such things be; but as it is, my liege, I do beseech thee, cease to urge me. I have but a woman's frame, a woman's heart, and yet death hath no fear for me. Let Edward work his will, if heaven ordain I fall into his ruthless hands; death comes but once, 'tis but a momentary pang, and rest and bliss shall follow. My father's spirit breathes within me, and as he would, so let his daughter do. 'Tis not now a time to depart from ancient forms, my gracious sovereign, and there are those in Scotland who scarce would deem thee crowned, did not the blood of Fife perform that holy office."

"And this, then, noble lady, is thy firm resolve, I may not hope to change it?"

"'Tis firm as the ocean rock, my liege. I do not sue thee to permit my will; the blood of Macduff which rushes in my veins doth mark it as my right, and as my right I do demand it." She stood in her majestic beauty, proudly and firmly before him, and unconsciously the king acknowledged and revered the dauntless spirit that lovely form enshrined.

"Lady," he said, raising her hand with reverence to his lips, "do as thou wilt, a weaker spirit would have shrunk at once in terror from the very thought of such open

defiance to King Edward. I should have known the mind that framed such daring purpose would never shrink from its fulfilment, however danger threatened ; enough we know thy faithfulness and worth, and where to seek for brave and noble counsel in the hour of need. And now may it be our privilege to present thee to our queen, sweet lady ? we shall rejoice to see thee ever near her person."

"I pray your grace excuse me for this night," answered the countess ; "we have made some length of way to-day, and, if it please you I would seek rest. Agnes shall supply my place ; Mary, thou wilt guard her, wilt thou not ?"

"Nay, be mine the grateful task," said the king, gaily taking the maiden's hand, and, after a few words of courtesy, he quitted the chamber followed by his sister.

There were sounds of mirth and revelry that night in the ancient halls of Scone, for King Robert, having taken upon himself the state and consequence of sovereignty, determined on encouraging the high spirits and excited joyousness of his gallant followers by all the amusements of chivalry which his confined and precarious situation permitted, and seldom was it that the dance and minstrelsy did not echo blithely in the royal suite for many hours of the evening, even when the day had brought with it anxiety and fatigue, and even intervals of despondency. There were many noble dames and some few youthful maidens in King Robert's court, animated by the same patriotic spirit which led their husbands and brothers to risk fortune and life in the service of their country, they preferred sharing and alleviating their dangers and anxieties, by thronging round the Bruce's wife, to the precarious calm and safety of their feudal castles ; and light-heartedness and glee shed their bright gleams on these social hours, never clouded by the gloomy shades that darkened the political horizon of the Bruce's fortunes. Perchance this night there was a yet brighter radiance cast over the royal halls, there was a spirit of light and glory in every word and action of the youthful enthusiast Nigel Bruce, that acted as with magic power on all around ; known in the courts of England but as a moody visionary boy, whose dreams were all too ethereal to guide him in this nether world, whose hand, however fitted to guide a pen, was all too weak to wield a sword ; the change,

or we should rather say the apparent change, perceived in him occasioned many an eye to gaze in silent wonderment, and, in the superstition of the time, argue well for the fortunes of one brother from the marvellous effect observable in the countenance and mood of the other.

The hopefulfulness of youth, its rosy visions, its smiling dreams, all sparkled in his bright blue eye, in the glad, free, ringing joyance of his deep rich voice, his cloudless smiles. And, oh, who is there can resist the witchery of life's young hopes, who does not feel the warm blood run quicker through his veins, and bid heart throb even as it hath throbbed in former days, and the grey hues of life melt away before the rosy glow of youth, even as the calm cold aspect of waning night is lost in the warmth and loveliness of the infant morn? And what was the magic acting on the enthusiast himself, that all traces of gloom and pensive thought were banished from his brow, that the full tide of poetry within his soul seemed thrilling on his lip, breathing in his simplest word, entrancing his whole being in joy? Scarce could he himself have defined its cause, such a multitude of strong emotions were busy at his heart. He saw not the dangers overhanging the path of the Bruce, he only saw and only felt him as his sovereign, as his brother, his friend, destined to be all that he had hoped, prayed, and believed he would be; willing to accept and return the affection he had so long felt, and give him that friendship and confidence for which he had yearned in vain so long. He saw his country free, independent, unshackled, glorious as of old; and there was a light and lovely being mingling in these stirring visions — when Scotland was free, what happiness would not be his own. Agnes, who flitted before him in that gay scene, the loveliest, dearest object there, clinging to him in her timidity, shrinking from the gaze of the warriors around, respectful as it was, feeling that all was strange, all save him to whom her young heart was vowed — if such exclusiveness was dear to him, if it were bliss to him to feel that, save her young brother, he alone had claim upon her notice and her smile, oh! what would it be when she indeed was all, all indivisibly his own? was it marvel, then, his soul was full of the joy that beamed forth from his eye, and lip, and brow — that his faintest tone breathed gladness?

There was music and mirth in the royal halls, the shadow of care had passed before the full sunshine of hope; but within that palace wall, not many roods removed from the royal suite, was one heart struggling with its lone agony, striving for calm, for peace, for rest, to escape from the deep waters threatening to overwhelm it. Hour after hour beheld the Countess of Buchan in the same spot, well-nigh in the same attitude; the agonized dream of her youth had come upon her yet once again, the voice whose musical echoes had never faded from her ear, once more had sounded in its own deep thrilling tones, his hand had pressed her own, his eye had met hers, aye, and dwelt upon her with the unfeigned reverence and admiration which had marked its expression years before; and it was to him her soul had yearned in all the fervidness of loyalty, not to a stranger as she had deemed him. Loyalty, patriotism, reverence her sovereign claimed, aye, and had received; but now how dare she encourage such emotions towards one it had been, aye, it was her duty to forget, to think of no more? Had her husband been fond, sought the noble heart which felt so bitterly his neglect, the gulf which now divided them might never have existed; and could she still the voice of that patriotism, that loyalty towards a free just monarch, which the dying words of a parent had so deeply inculcated, and which the sentiments of her own heart had increased in steadiness and strength? On what had that lone heart to rest, to subdue its tempest, to give it nerve and force, to rise pure in thought as in deed, unstained, unshaded in its nobleness, what but its own innate purity? Yet fearful was the storm that passed over her, terrible the struggle which shook that bent form, as in lowliness and contrition, and agony of spirit, she knelt before the silver crucifix, and called upon heaven in its mercy to give peace and strength—fierce, fierce and terrible, but the agonized cry was heard, the stormy waves were stilled.

CHAPTER V.

BRIGHTLY and blithely dawned the 26th of March, 1306, for the loyal inhabitants of Scone. Few who might gaze on the olden city, and marked the flags and pennons waving gaily and proudly on every side, the rich tapestry flung over balconies or hung from the massive windows, in every street, the large branches of oak and laurel, festooned with gay ribands, that stood beside the entrance of every house which boasted any consequence, the busy citizens in goodly array, with their wives and families, bedecked to the best of their ability, all, as inspired by one spirit, hurrying in the direction of the abbey yard, joining the merry clamour of eager voices to the continued peal of every bell of which the old town could boast, sounding loud and joyously even above the roll of the drum or the shrill trumpet call—those who marked these things might well believe Scotland was once again the same free land, which had hailed in the same town the coronation of Alexander the Third, some years before. Little would they deem that the foreign foeman still thronged her feudal holds and cottage homes, that they waited but the commands of their monarch, to pour down on all sides upon the daring individual who thus boldly assumed the state and solemn honour of a king, and, armed but by his own high heart and a handful of loyal followers, prepared to resist, defend, and *free*, or *die* for Scotland.

There was silence — deep, solemn, yet most eloquent silence — reigning in the abbey church of Scone. The sun shining in that full flood of glory we sometimes find in the infant spring, illumined as with golden lustre the long, narrow casements, falling thence in flickering brilliance on the pavement floor, its rays sometimes arrested, to revolve in heightened lustre from the glittering sword or the suit of half-mail of one or other of the noble knights assembled there. The rich plate of the abbey, all at least which had escaped the cupidity of Edward, was arranged with care upon the various altars; in the centre of the church was placed the abbot's oaken throne, which was to supply the place of the ancient stone, the coronation seat of the Scottish kings—no longer there, its absence felt by one and all within that church as the closing seal to Edward's

infamy—the damning proof that as his slave, not as his sister kingdom, he sought to render Scotland. From the throne to the high altar, where the king was to receive the eucharist, a carpet of richly brocaded Genoa velvet was laid down ; a cushion of the same elegantly-wrought material marked the place beside the spot where he was to kneel. Priests, in their richest vestments, officiated at the high altar ; six beautiful boys, bearing alternately a large waxen candle, and the golden censers filled with the richest incense, stood beside them, while opposite the altar and behind the throne, in an elevated gallery, were ranged the seventy choristers of the abbey, thirty of whom were youthful novices ; behind them a massive screen or curtain of tapestry concealed the organ, and gave a yet more startling and thrilling effect to its rich deep tones, thus bursting as it were from spheres unseen.

The throne was already occupied by the patriot king, clothed in his robes of state ; his inner dress was a doublet and vest of white velvet, slashed with cloth of silver ; his stockings, fitting tight to the knee, were of the finest woven white silk, confined where they met the doublet with a broad band of silver ; his shoes of white velvet, brodered with silver, in unison with his dress ; a scarf of cloth of silver passed over his right shoulder, fastened there by a jewelled clasp, and, crossing his breast, secured his trusty sword to his left side ; his head, of course was bare, and his fair hair, parted carefully on his arched and noble brow, descended gracefully on either side ; his countenance was perfectly calm, unexpressive of aught save of a deep sense of the solemn service in which he was engaged. There was not the faintest trace of either anxiety or exultation—nought that could shadow the brows of his followers, or diminish by one particle the love and veneration which in every heart were rapidly gaining absolute dominion.

On the right of the king stood the Abbot of Scone, the Archbishop of St. Andrew's, and Bishop of Glasgow, all of which venerable prelates had instantaneously and unhesitatingly declared for the Bruce : ranged on either side of the throne, according more to seniority than rank, were seated the brothers of the Bruce and the loyal barons who had joined his standard. Names that were already famous in the annals of patriotism—Fraser, Lennox, Athol, Hay—

whose stalwart arms had so nobly struck for Wallace, whose steady minds had risen superior to the petty emotions of jealousy and envy which had actuated so many of similar rank. These were true patriots, and gladly and freely they once more rose for Scotland. Sir Christopher Seaton, brother-in-law to the Bruce, Somerville, Keith, St. Clair, the young Lord Douglas, and Thomas Randolph, the king's nephew, were the most noted of those now around the Bruce; yet on that eventful day not more than fourteen barons were mustered round their sovereign, exclusive of his four gallant brothers, who were in themselves a host. All these were attired with the care and gallantry their precarious situation permitted; half armour, concealed by flowing scarfs and graceful mantles, or suits of gayer seeming among the younger knights, for those of the barons' followers of gentle blood and chivalric training were also admitted within the church, forming a goodly show of gallant men. Behind them, on raised seats, which were divided from the body of the church by an open railing of ebony, sate the ladies of the court, the seat of the queen distinguished from the rest by its canopy and cushion of embroidered taffeta, and amongst those gentle beings fairest and loveliest shone the maiden of Buchan, as she sate in smiling happiness between the youthful daughter of the Bruce, the Princess Margory, and his niece, the Lady Isoline, children of ten and fourteen, who already claimed her as their companion and friend.

The colour was bright on the soft cheek of Agnes, the smile laughed alike in her lip and eye, for ever and anon, from amidst the courtly crowd beneath, the deep blue orb of Nigel Bruce met hers, speaking in its passioned yet respectful gaze all that could whisper joy and peace unto a heart, young, loving, and confiding as that of Agnes. The evening previous he had detached the blue riband which confined her flowing curls, and it was with a feeling of pardonable pride she beheld it suspended from his neck, even in that hour, when his rich habiliments and the imposing ceremony of the day marked him the brother of a king. Her brother, too, was at his side, gazing upon his sovereign with feelings, whose index, marked as it was on his brow, gave him the appearance of being older than he was. It was scarcely the excitement of a mere boy, who

rejoiced in the state and dignity around him ; the emotion of his mother had sunk upon his very soul, subduing the wild buoyancy of his spirit, and bidding him feel deeply and sadly the situation in which he stood. It seemed to him as if he had never thought before, and now that reflection had come upon him, it was fraught with a weight and gloom he could not remove and scarcely comprehend. He felt no power on earth could prevent his taking the only path which was open to the true patriot of Scotland, and in following that path he raised the standard of revolt, and enlisted his own followers against his father. Till the moment of action he had dreamed not of these things ; but the deep anxieties, the contending feelings of his mother, which, despite her controlled demeanour, his heart perceived, could not but have their effect, and premature manhood was stealing fast upon his heart.

Upon the left of the king, and close beside his throne, stood the countess of Buchan, attired in robes of the darkest crimson velvet, with a deep border of gold, which swept the ground, long falling sleeves with a broad fringe ; a thick cord of gold and tassels confined the robe around the waist, and thence fell reaching to her feet, and well-nigh concealing the inner dress of white silk, which was worn to permit the robes falling easily on either side, and thus forming a long train behind. Neither gem nor gold adorned her beautiful hair ; a veil was twisted in its luxuriant tresses, and served the purpose of the matron's coif. She was pale and calm, but such was the usual expression of her countenance, and perhaps accorded better with the dignified majesty of her commanding figure than a greater play of feature. It was not the calmness of insensibility, of vacancy, it was the still reflection of a controlled and chastened soul of one whose depth and might was known but to herself.

The pealing anthem for a while had ceased, and it was as if that church was desolate, as if the very hearts that throbbed so quickly for their country and their king were hushed awhile and stilled, that every word which passed between the sovereign and the primate should be heard. Kneeling before him, his hands placed between those of the archbishop, the king, in a clear and manly voice, received as it were the kingdom from his hands, and swore to

govern according to the laws of his ancestors ; to defend the liberties of his people alike from the foreign and the civil foe ; to dispense justice ; to devote life itself to restoring Scotland to her former station in the scale of kingdoms. Solemnly, energetically he took the required vows ; his cheek flushed, his eye glistened, and ere he rose he bent his brow upon his spread hands, as if his spirit supplicated strength, and the primate, standing over him, blessed him, in a loud voice, in the name of Him whose lowly minister he was.

A few minutes, and the king was again seated on his throne, and from the hands of the Bishop of Glasgow the Countess of Buchan received the simple coronet of gold, which had been hastily made to supply the place of that which Edward had removed. It was a moment of intense interest : every eye was directed towards the king and the dauntless woman by his side, who, rather than the descendant of Malcolm Cean Mohr should demand in vain the service from the descendants of the brave Macduff, exposed herself to all the wrath of a fierce and cruel king, the fury of an incensed husband and brother, and in her own noble person represented that ancient and most loyal line. Were any other circumstance needed to enhance the excitement of the patriots of Scotland, they would have found it in this. As it was, a sudden irrepressible burst of applause broke from many eager voices, as the bishop placed the coronet in her hands, but one glance from those dark eloquent eyes sufficed to hush it on the instant into stillness.

Simultaneously all within the church stood up, and gracefully and steadily, with a hand which trembled not, even to the observant and anxious eyes of her son, Isabella of Buchan placed the sacred symbol of royalty on the head of Scotland's king ; and then arose, as with one voice, the wild enthusiastic shout of loyalty, which, bursting from all within the church, was echoed again and again from without, almost drowning the triumphant anthem which at the same moment sent its rich hallowed tones through the building, and proclaimed Robert Bruce indeed a king.

Again and yet again the voice of triumph and of loyalty arose hundred-tongued, and sent its echo even to the English camp ; and when it ceased, when slowly, and as it were, reluctantly, it died away, it was a grand and glorious

sight to see those stern and noble barons one by one approach their sovereign's throne and do him homage.

It was not always customary for the monarchs of those days to receive the feudal homage of their vassals the same hour of their coronation, it was in general a distinct and almost equally gorgeous ceremony ; but in this case both the king and barons felt it better policy to unite them ; the excitement attendant on the one ceremonial they felt would prevent the deficiency of numbers in the other being observed, and they acted wisely.

There was a dauntless firmness in each baron's look, in his manly carriage and unwavering step, as one by one he traversed the space between him and the throne, seeming to proclaim that in himself he held indeed a host. To adhere to the usual custom of paying homage to the suzerain bareheaded, barefooted, and unarmed, the embroidered slipper had been adopted by all instead of the iron boot ; and as he knelt before the throne, the Earl of Lennox, for, first in rank, he first approached his sovereign, unbuckling his trusty sword, laid it, together with his dagger, at Robert's feet, and placing his clasped hands between those of the king, repeated, in a deep sonorous voice, the solemn vow—to live and die with him against all manner of men. Athol, Fraser, Seaton, Douglas, Hay gladly and willingly followed his example, and it was curious to mark the character of each man, proclaimed in his mien and hurried step.

The calm, controlled, and somewhat thoughtful manner of those grown wise in war, their bold spirits feeling to the inmost soul the whole extent of the risk they run, scarcely daring to anticipate the freedom of their country, the emancipation of their king from the heavy yoke that threatened him, and yet so firm in the oath they pledged, that had destruction yawned before them ere they reached the throne, they would have dared it rather than turned back. And then again those hot and eager youths, feeling, knowing but the excitement of the hour, believing but as they hoped, seeing but a king, a free and independent king, bounding from their seats to the monarch's feet, regardless of the solemn ceremonial in which they took a part, desirous only, in the words of their oath, to live and die for him. And a brighter flush mantled on King Robert's cheek, and his

eyes shone with new and radiant light. None knew better than himself the perils that encircled him, yet there was a momentary glow of exultation in his heart as he looked on the noble warriors, the faithful friends around him, and felt they, even they, representatives of the oldest, the noblest houses in Scotland—men famed not alone for their gallant bearing in war, but their fidelity and wisdom, and unstained honour and virtue in peace—even they acknowledged him their king, and vowed him that allegiance which was never known to fail.

Alan of Buchan was the last of that small yet noble train who approached his sovereign. There was a hot flush of impetuous feeling on the boy's cheek, an indignant fear trembled in his dark flashing eye, and his voice, sweet, thrilling as it was, quivered with the vain effort to restrain his emotion.

"Sovereign of Scotland," he exclaimed, "descendant of that glorious line of kings to whom my ancestors have until this dark day vowed homage and allegiance, sovereign of all good and faithful men, on whose inmost souls the name of Scotland is so indelibly writ, that even in death it may there be found, refuse not thou my homage. I have but my sword, not e'en a name of which to boast, yet hear me swear," he raised his clasped hands towards heaven, "swear that for thee, for my country, for thee alone, will I draw it, alone shall my life be spent, my blood be shed. Reject me not because my name is Comyn, because I alone am here of that once loyal house. Oh! condemn me not; reject not untried a loyal heart and trusty sword."

"Reject thee," said King Robert, laying his hand kindly on the boy's shoulder, "reject thee, young soldier," he said, cheerfully, "in Alan of Buchan, we see but the noble son of our right noble countrywoman, the Lady Isabella; we see in him but a worthy descendant of Macduff, the noble scion, though but by the mother's side, of the loyal house of Fife. Young as thou art, we ask of thee but the heart and sword which thou hast so earnestly proffered, nor can we, son of Isabella of Fife, doubt their honesty and truth; thou shalt earn a loyal name for thyself, and till then, as the brother in arms, the chosen friend of Nigel Bruce, all shall respect and trust thee. We confer knighthood on twenty of our youthful warriors seven days hence; prepare thyself

to receive it with our brother ; enough for us to know thou hast learned the art of chivalry at thy mother's hand."

Dazzled, bewildered by the benign manner, and yet more gracious words of his sovereign, the young heir of Buchan remained kneeling for a brief space, as if rooted to the ground, but the deep earnest voice of his mother, the kind greeting of Nigel Bruce, as he grasped his arm, and hailed him companion in arms, roused him at once, and he sprung to his feet ; the despondency, shame, doubt, anxiety which like lead had weighed down his heart before, dissolved before the glad buoyant spirit, the bright, free, glorious hopes, and dreams, and visions which are known to youth alone.

Stentorian and simultaneous was the eager shout that hailed the appearance of the newly-anointed king, as he paused a moment on the great stone staircase, leading from the principal doors of the abbey to the abbey yard. For miles round, particularly from those counties which were but thinly garrisoned by the English, the loyal Scots had poured at the first rumour of the Bruce's rising, and now a rejoicing multitude welcomed him with one voice, the execrations against their foes forgotten in this outpouring of the heart towards their native prince.

Inspired by this heartfelt greeting, the king advanced a few paces on the stone terrace, and raised his right hand, as if about to speak ; on the instant every shout was hushed, and silence fell upon that eager multitude, as deep and voiceless, as if some mighty magic chained them spell-bound where they stood, their very breathing hushed, fearful to lose one word.

Many an aged eye grew dim with tears, as it rested on the fair and graceful form, the beautifully expressive face of him, who, with eloquent fervour, referred to the ancient glory of their country ; tears of joy, for they felt they looked upon the good genius of their land, that she was raised from her dejected stupor, to sleep a slave no more ; and the middle-aged and the young, with deafening shouts and eager gestures, swore to give him the crown, the kingdom he demanded, free, unshackled as his ancestors had borne them, or die around him to a man ; and blessings and prayers in woman's gentler voice mingled with the

swelling cry, and little children caught the Bruce's name, and bade "God bless him," and others, equally impetuous, shouted "Bruce and freedom!"

"Love, obey, follow me, for Scotland's sake; noble or gentle, let all private feud be forgotten in this one great struggle for liberty or death. Thus," he concluded, "united and faithful, the name of Wallace on each lip, the weal of Scotland in each heart, her mountains our shield, her freedom our sword, shall we, can we fail? No! no! Scotland shall be free, or her green sod and mountain flowers shall bloom upon our graves. I have no crown save that which Scotland gives, no kingdom save what your swords shall conquer, and your hearts bestow; with you I live and die."

In the midst of the shouts and unrestrained clamour, succeeding this eloquent address, the fiery chargers of the king and his attendant barons and esquires were led to the foot of the staircase. And a fair and noble sight was the royal *cortège* as slowly it passed through the old town, with banners flying, lances gleaming, and the rich swell of triumphal music echoing on the air; nobles and dames mingled indiscriminately together; beautiful palfreys or well-trained glossy mules, richly caparisoned, gracefully guided by the dames and maidens, bore their part well amid the more fiery chargers of their companions. The queen rode at King Robert's left hand, the primate of Scotland at his right, Lennox, Seaton, and Hay thronged around the Countess of Buchan, eager to pay her that courteous homage which she now no longer refused, and willingly joined in their animated converse. The Lady Mary Campbell and her sister Lady Seaton found an equally gallant and willing escort, as did the other noble dames; but none ventured to dispute the possession of the maiden of Buchan with the gallant Nigel, who, riding close at her bridle rein, ever and anon murmured some magic words that called a blush to her cheek and a smile on her lip, their attention called off now and then by some wild jest or courteous word from the young Lord Douglas, whose post seemed in every part of the royal train; now galloping to the front, to caracole by the side of the queen, to accustom her, he said, to the sight of good horsemanship, then lingering beside the Countess of Buchan, to give some

unexpected rejoinder to the graver maxims of Lennox. The Princess Margory, her cousins, the Lady Isoline Campbell and Alice and Christina Seaton, escorted by Alan of Buchan, Walter Fitz-Alan, Alexander Fraser, and many other young esquires, rejoicing in the task assigned them.

It was a gay and gorgeous sight, and beautiful the ringing laugh and silvery voice of youth. No dream of desponding dread shadowed their hearts, though danger and suffering, and defeat and death, were darkly gathering round them. Who, as he treads the elastic earth, fresh with the breeze of day, as he gazes on the cloudless blue of the circling sky, or the dazzling rays of the morning sun, as the hum of happy life is round him—who is there thinks of the silence, and darkness, and tempest that comes in a few brief hours, on the shadowy pinions of night?

CHAPTER VI.

SOME ten or twelve days after the momentous event recorded in our last chapter, King Edward's royal palace, at Winchester, was thronged at an unusually early hour by many noble knights and barons, bearing on their countenances symptoms of some new and unexpected excitement; and there was a dark boding gloom on the now contracted brow and altered features of England's king, as, weakened and well-nigh worn out by a lingering disease, he reclined on a well-cushioned couch, to receive the eagerly-offered homage of his loyal barons. He who had been from earliest youth a warrior, with whose might and dauntless prowess there was not one, or prince, or noble, or English or foreigner, could compete, whose strength of frame and energy of mind had ever borne him scathless and uninjured through scenes of fatigue, and danger, and blood, and death. Whose sword had restored a kingdom to his father—had struggled for Palestine and her holy pilgrims—had given Wales to England, and again and again prostrated the hopes and energies of Scotland into dust—even he, this mighty prince lay prostrate now, unable to conquer or to struggle with disease—disease that attacked the slave, the lowest serf or yeoman of his land, and thus made manifest, how in

the sight of that King of Kings, from whom both might and weakness come, the prince and peasant are alike—the monarch and the slave!

The disease had been indeed in part subdued, but Edward could not close his eyes to the fact that he should never again be what he had been; that the strength which had enabled him to do and endure so much, the energy which had ever led him on to victory, the fire which had so often inspired his own heart, and urged on, as by magic power, his followers—that all these were gone from him, and for ever. Ambition, indeed, yet burned within, strong, undying, mighty; aye, perhaps mightier than ever, as the power of satisfying that ambition glided from his grasp. He had rested, indeed, a brief while, secure in the fulfilment of his darling wish, that every rood of land composing the British Isles should be united under him as sole sovereign; he believed, and rejoiced in the belief, that with Wallace all hope or desire of resistance had departed. His disease had been at its height when Bruce departed from his court, and disabled him awhile from composedly considering how that event would affect his interest in Scotland. As the violence of the disease subsided, however, he had leisure to contemplate and become anxious. Rumours, some extravagant, some probable, now floated about; and the sovereign looked anxiously to the high festival of Easter to bring all his barons around him, and by the absence or presence of the suspected, discover at once how far his suspicions and the floating rumours were correct.

Although the indisposition of the sovereign prevented the feasting, merry-making, and other customary marks of royal munificence, which ever attended the solemnization of Easter, yet it did not in any way interfere with the bounden duty of every earl and baron, knight and liegeman, and high ecclesiastics of the realm to present themselves before the monarch at such a time; Easter, Whitsuntide, and Christmas being the seasons when every loyal subject of fit degree appeared attendant on his sovereign, without any summons so to do.

They had been seasons of peculiar interest since the dismemberment of Scotland, for Edward's power was such, that seldom had the peers and other great officers of that land refused the tacit acknowledgement of England's supremacy

by their non-appearance. Even in that which was deemed the rebellion of Wallace, the highest families, even the competitors for the crown, and all the knights and vassals in their interest, had swelled the train of the conqueror; but this Easter ten or twelve great barons and their followers were missing. The nobles had eagerly and anxiously scanned the countenances of each, and whispered suspicions and rumours, which one glance on their monarch's ruffled brow confirmed.

"So ho! my faithful lords and gallant knights," he exclaimed, after the preliminaries of courtesy between each noble and his sovereign had been more hastily than usual performed, speaking in a tone so unusually harsh and sarcastic, that the terms "faithful and gallant," seemed used but in mockery; "so ho! these are strange news we hear. Where be my Lords of Carrick, Athol, Lennox, Hay? Where be the knights of Seaton, Somerville, Keith, and very many others we could name? Where be these proud lords, I say? Are none of ye well-informed on these things? I ask ye where be they? Why are they not here?"

There was a pause, for none dared risk reply. Edward's voice had waxed louder and louder, his sallow cheek flushed with wrath, and he raised himself from his couch, as if irritability of thought had imparted strength to his frame.

"I ask ye, where be these truant lords? There be some of ye who *can* reply; aye, and by good St. Edward, reply ye shall. Gloucester, my lord of Gloucester, stand forth, I say," he continued, the thunderstorm drawing to that climax which made many tremble lest its bolt should fall upon the daring baron who rumour said was implicated in the flight of the Bruce, and who now stood, his perfect self-possession and calmness of mien and feature contrasting well with the fury of his sovereign.

"And darest thou front me with that bold, shameless brow, false traitor as thou art?" continued the king, as, with head erect and arms proudly folded in his mantle, Gloucester obeyed the king's impatient summons. "Traitor! I call thee traitor! aye, in the presence of thy country's noblest peers, I charge thee with a traitor's deed; deny it, if thou darest."

"'Tis my sovereign speaks the word, else had it not been

spoken with impunity," returned the noble, proudly and composedly, though his cheek burned and his eye flashed. "Yes, monarch of England, I dare deny the charge! Gloucester is no traitor!"

"How! dost thou brave me, minion? darest thou deny the fact, that from thee, from thy traitorous hand, thy base connivance, Robert of Carrick, warned that we knew his treachery, fled from our power—that 'tis to thee, we owe the pleasant news we have but now received? Hast thou not given that rebel Scotland a head, a chief, in this fell traitor, and art thou not part and parcel of his guilt? Darest thou deny that from thee he received intelligence and means of flight? Baron of Gloucester, thou darest not add the stigma of falsity to thy already dishonoured name!"

"Sovereign of England, my gracious liege and honoured king," answered Gloucester, still apparently unmoved, and utterly regardless of the danger in which he stood, "dishonour is not farther removed from thy royal name than it is from Gloucester's. I bear no stain of either falsity or treachery; that which thou hast laid to my charge regarding the Earl of Carrick, I shrink not, care not to acknowledge; yet, Edward of England, I am no traitor!"

"Ha! thou specious orator, reconcile the two an thou canst! Thou art a scholar of deep research and eloquence profound, we have heard. Speak on, then, in heaven's name!" He flung himself back on his cushions as he spoke, for, despite his wrath, his suspicions, there was that in the calm, chivalric bearing of the earl that appealed not in vain to one who had so long been the soul of chivalry himself.

The tone in which his sovereign spoke was softened, though his words were bitter, and Gloucester at once relaxed from his proud and cold reserve; kneeling before him, he spoke with fervour and impassioned truth—

"Condemn me not unheard, my gracious sovereign," he said. "I speak not to a harsh and despotic king, who brings his faithful subjects to the block at the first whisper of evil or misguided conduct cast to their charge; were Edward such, Gloucester would speak not, hope not for justice at his hands; but to thee, my liege, to thee, to whom all true knights may look up as to the mirror of all that knight should be—the life and soul of chivalry—to thee, the noblest

warrior, the truest knight that ever put lance in rest—to thee, I say, I am no traitor; and appeal but to the spirit of chivalry actuating thine own heart to acquit or condemn me as it listeth. Hear me, my liege. Robert of Carrick and myself were sworn brothers from the first hour of our entrance together upon life, as pages, esquires, and finally, as knights, made such by thine own royal hand; brothers in arms, in dangers, in victories, in defeat; aye, and brothers—more than brothers—in mutual fidelity and love; to receive life, to be rescued from captivity at each other's hand, to become equal sharers of whatever honours might be granted to the one and not the other. Need my sovereign be reminded that such constitutes the ties of brothers in arms, and such brothers were Robert of Carrick and Gilbert of Gloucester. There came a rumour that the instigations of a base traitor had poisoned your grace's ear against one of these sworn brothers, threatening his liberty, if not his life; that which was revealed, its exact truth or falsehood, might Gloucester pause to list or weigh? My liege, thou knowest it could not be. A piece of money and a pair of spurs was all the hint, the warning, that he dared to give, and it was given, and its warning taken; and the imperative duty the laws of chivalry, of honour, friendship all alike demanded done. The brother by the brother saved! Was Gloucester, then, a traitor to his sovereign, my good liege?"

"Say first, my lord, how Gloucester now will reconcile these widely adverse duties, how comport himself, if duty to his liege and sovereign call on him to lift his sword against his brother?" demanded Edward, raising himself on his elbow, and looking on the kneeling nobleman with eyes which seemed to have recovered their flashing light to penetrate his soul. Wrath itself appeared to have subsided before this calm yet eloquent appeal, which in that age could scarcely have been resisted without affecting the honour of the knight to whom it was addressed.

An expression of suffering, amounting almost to anguish, took the place of energy and fervour on the noble countenance of Gloucester, and his voice, which had never once quivered or failed him in the height of Edward's wrath, now absolutely shook with the effort to master his emotion. Twice he essayed to speak ere words came; at length—

"With Robert of Carrick, Gilbert of Gloucester was allied

as brother, my liege," he said. "With Robert the rebel, Robert the would-be king, the daring opposer of my sovereign, Gloucester can have nought in common. My liege, as a knight and gentleman, I have done my duty fearlessly, openly; as fearlessly, as openly, as your grace's loyal liegeman, fief, and subject, in the camp and in the court, in victory or defeat, against all manner or ranks of men, be they friends or foes; to my secret heart I am thine, and thine alone. In proof of which submission, my royal liege, lest still in your grace's judgment Gloucester be not cleared from treachery, behold I resign alike my sword and coronet to your royal hands, never again to be resumed, save at my sovereign's bidding."

His voice became again firm ere he concluded, and with the same respectful deference yet manly pride which had marked his bearing throughout, he laid his sheathed sword and golden coronet at his sovereign's feet, and then rising steadily and unflinchingly, returned Edward's searching glance, and calmly awaited his decision.

"By St. Edward! Baron of Gloucester," he exclaimed, in his own tone of kingly courtesy, mingled with a species of admiration he cared not to conceal, "thou hast fairly challenged us to run a tilt with thee, not of sword and lance, but of all knightly and generous courtesy. I were no true knight to condemn, nor king to mistrust thee; yet, of a truth, the fruit of thy rash act might chafe a cooler mood than ours. Knowest thou Sir John Comyn is murdered—murdered by the arch traitor thou hast saved from our wrath?"

"I heard it, good my liege," calmly returned Gloucester. "Robert of Carrick was no temper to pass by injuries, aggravated, traitorous injuries, unavenged."

"And this is all thou sayest!" exclaimed Edward, his wrath once again gaining dominion. "Wouldst thou defend this base deed on plea, forsooth, that Comyn was a traitor? Traitor—and to whom?"

"To the man that trusted him, my liege; to him he falsely swore to second and to aid. To every law of knight-hood and of honour I say he was a traitor, and deserved his fate."

"And this to thy sovereign, madman? to us, whose dignity and person have been insulted, lowered, trampled on?"

By all the saints, thou has tempted us too far! What ho, there, guards! Am I indeed so old and witless," he muttered, sinking back again upon the couch from which he had started in the moment of excitement, "as so soon to forget a knightly nobleness, which in former days would have knitted my very soul to his? Bah! 'tis this fell disease that spoke, not Edward. Away with ye, sir guards, we want ye not," he added, imperatively, as they approached at his summons. "And thou, sir earl, take up thy sword, and hence from my sight awhile;—answer not, but obey. I fear more for mine own honour than thou dost for thy head. We neither disarm nor restrain thee, for we trust thee still; but away with thee, for on our kingly faith, thou hast tried us sorely."

Gloucester flung himself on his knee beside his sovereign, his lips upon the royal hand, which, though scarcely yielded to him, was not withheld, and hastily resuming his sword and coronet, with a deep reverence, silently withdrew.

The king looked after him, admiration and fierce anger struggling for dominion alike on his countenance as in his heart, and then sternly and piercingly he scanned the noble crowd, who, hushed into a silence of terror as well as of extreme interest during the scene they had beheld, now seemed absolutely to shrink from the dark, flashing orbs of the king, as they rested on each successively, as if the accusation of *his* would follow that of eye, and the charge of treason fall indiscriminately on all; but exhausted from the passion to which he had given vent, Edward once more stretched himself on his cushions, and merely muttered—

"Deserved his fate—a traitor. Is Gloucester mad—or worse, disloyal? No; that open brow and fearless eye are truth and faithfulness alone. I will not doubt him; 'tis but his lingering love for that foul traitor Bruce, which I were no true knight to hold in blame. But that murder, that base murder—insult alike to our authority, our realm—by every saint in heaven, it shall be fearfully avenged, and that madman rue the day he dared fling down the gauntlet of rebellion!" and as he spoke his right hand instinctively grasped the hilt of his sword, and half drew it from its sheath.

"Madman, in very truth, my liege," said Aymer de Valance, Earl of Pembroke, who, high in favour with his

sovereign alone ventured to address him ; “as your grace will believe, when I say not only hath he dared defy thee by the murder of Comyn, but has had the presumptuous folly to enact the farce of coronation, taking upon himself all the insignia of a king.”

“How ! what say’st thou, De Valence,” returned Edward, again starting up, “coronation—king ? By St. Edward ! this passeth all credence. Whence hadst thou this witless news ?”

“From sure authority, my liege, marvellous as they seem. These papers, if it please your grace to peruse, contain matters of import which demand most serious attention.”

“Anon, anon, sir earl !” answered Edward impatiently, as Pembroke, kneeling, laid the papers on a small table of ivory which stood at the monarch’s side. “Tell me more of this strange farce ; a king, ha ! ha ! Does the rebel think ’tis but to put a crown upon his head and a sceptre in his hand that makes the monarch—a king, forsooth. And who officiated at this right solemn mockery ? ’Twas, doubtless, a goodly sight !”

“On my knightly faith, my liege, strangely, yet truly, ’twas a ceremony regally performed, and, save for numbers, regally attended.”

“Thou darest not tell me so !” exclaimed the king, striking his clenched hand fiercely on the table. “I tell thee thou darest not ; ’tis a false tale, a lie thrust upon thee to rouse thy spirit but to laugh at. De Valence, I tell thee ’tis a thing that cannot be ! Scotland is laid too low, her energies are crushed ; her best and bravest lying in no bloodless graves. Who is there to attend this puppet king, save the few we miss ? who dared provoke our wrath by the countenance of such a deed ? Who would dare tempt our fury by placing a crown on the rebel’s head ? I tell thee they have played thee false—it cannot be !”

“Thy valour hath done much, my gracious liege,” returned Pembroke, “far more than ever king hath done before ; but pardon me, your grace, the *people* of Scotland are not yet crushed, they lie apparently in peace, till a chief capable of guiding, lordly in rank and knightly in war, ariseth, and then they too stand forth. Yet what are they ? they do but nominally swell the rebel’s court ; they do but *seem* a multitude, which needs but thy presence to disperse. He cannot, if he dare, resist thee.”

"And wherefore should these tidings so disturb your grace?" interposed the Earl of Hereford, a brave, blunt, soldier, like his own charger, snuffing the scent of war far off. "We have but to bridle on our harness, and we shall hear no more of solemn farces like to this. Give but the word, my sovereign, and those ignoble rebels shall be cut off to a man, by an army as numerous and well appointed as any that have yet followed your grace to victory; 'tis a pity they have but to encounter traitors and rebels, instead of knightly foes," continued the High Constable of England.

"Perchance Robert of Carrick deems the assumption of king will provoke your grace to combat even more than his traitorous rebellion, imagining, in his madness, the title of king may make ye equals," laughingly observed the Earl of Arundel; and remarks and opinions of similar import passed round, but Edward, who had snatched the papers as he ceased to speak, and was now deeply engrossed in their contents, neither replied to nor heeded them. Darker and darker grew the frown upon his brow; his tightly compressed lip, his heaving chest betrayed the fearful passion that agitated him; but when he spoke, there was evidently a struggle for that dignified calmness which in general distinguished him, though ever and anon burst forth the undisguised voice of wrath.

"'Tis well, 'tis very well," he said. "These wild Scots would tempt us to the utmost, and they shall be satisfied. Ah! my lords of Buchan and Fife, give ye good morrow. What think ye of these doings amidst your countrymen; bethink ye they have done well?"

"Well, as relates to their own ruin, aye, very well, my liege; they act but as would every follower of the murderer Bruce," replied Buchan, harshly and sullenly.

"They are mad, stark mad, your highness; the loss of a little blood may bring them to their senses," rejoined the more volatile Fife.

"And is it thus ye think, base, villainous traitors as ye are? leagued with the rebel band in his coronation. My Lord of Chester, attach them of high treason."

"What means your grace?" exclaimed both noblemen at once, but in very different accents. "Of what are we charged, and who dare make this lying accusation?"

"Are ye indeed so ignorant?" replied the king, jibingly. "Know ye not that Isabella, Countess of Buchan, and representative, in the absence of her brother, of the earldom of Fife, hath so dared our displeasure as to place the crown on the rebel's head, and vow him homage?"

"Hath she indeed dared so to do. By heaven, she shall rue this!" burst wrathfully from Buchan, his swarthy countenance assuming a yet swarthier aspect. "My liege, I swear to thee, by the Holy Cross, I knew no more of this than did your grace. Thinkest thou I would aid and abet the cause of one not merely a rebel and a traitor, but the foul murderer of a Comyn—one at whose hands, by the sword's point, have I sworn to demand my kinsman, and avenge him?"

"And wherefore did Isabella of Buchan take upon herself this deed, my liege, but because the only male descendant of her house refused to give his countenance or aid to this false earl; because Duncan of Fife was neither a rebel himself, nor gave his aid to rebels. On the honour of a knight, my liege, I know nought of this foul deed."

"It may be, it may be," answered Edward, impatiently. "We will see to it, and condemn ye not unheard; but in times like these, when traitors and rebels walk abroad and insult us to our very teeth, by St. Edward, our honour, our safety demands the committal of the suspected till they be cleared. Resign your swords to my Lord of Chester, and confine yourselves to your apartments. If ye be innocent, we will find means to repay you for the injustice we have done; if not, the axe and the block shall make short work. Begone!"

Black as a thunderbolt was the scowl that lowered over the brow of Buchan, as he sullenly unclasped his sword and gave it into the Lord Constable's hand; while with an action of careless recklessness the Earl of Fife followed his example, and they retired together, the one scowling defiance on all who crossed his path, the other jesting and laughing with each and all.

"I would not give my best falcon as pledge for the Countess of Buchan's well-doing, an she hath done this without her lord's connivance," whispered the Prince of Wales to one of his favourites, with many of whom he had been conversing, in a low voice, as if his father's wrathful accents were not particularly grateful to his ear.

“Nor would I pledge a hawk for her safety, if she fall into his grace’s hands, whether with her lord’s consent or no,” replied the young nobleman, laughing. “Your royal father is fearfully incensed.”

“Better destroy them root and branch at once,” said the prince, who, like all weak minds, loved any extremity better than a protracted struggle. “Exterminate with fire and sword; ravage the land till there be neither food for man nor beast; let neither noble nor serf remain, and then, perchance, we shall hear no more of Scotland. On my faith, I am sick of the word.”

“Not so the king, my royal lord,” returned his companion. “See how eagerly he talks to my lords of Pembroke and Hereford. We shall have our sovereign yet again at our head.”

And it was even as he said. The king, with that strong self-command which disease alone could in any way cause to fail, now conquering alike his bitter disappointment and the fury it engendered, turned his whole thought and energy towards obtaining the downfall of his insolent opponents at one stroke; and for that purpose, summoning around him the brave companions of former campaigns, and other officers of state, he retired with them to his private closet to deliberate more at length on the extraordinary news they had received, and the best means of nipping the rebellion in the bud.

CHAPTER VII.

THE evening of this eventful day found the Scottish earls seated together in a small apartment in one of the buildings adjoining the royal palace, which in the solemn seasons we have enumerated was always crowded with guests, who were there feasted and maintained at the king’s expense during the whole of their stay. Inconveniences in their private quarters were little heeded by the nobles, who seldom found themselves there, save for the purpose of a few hours sleep, and served but to enhance by contrast the lavish richness and luxury which surrounded them in the palace and presence of their king; but to the Earls of

Buchan and Fife the inconveniences of their quarters very materially increased the irritability and annoyance of their present situation. Fife had stretched himself on two chairs, and leaning his elbows on the broad shelf formed by the small casement, cast many wistful glances on the street below, through which richly-attired gallants, both on foot and horseback, were continually passing. He was one of those frivolous little minds with whom the present is all in all, caring little for the past, and still less for the future. It was no marvel, therefore, that he preferred the utter abandonment of his distracted country for the luxury and ease attending the court and camp of Edward, to the great dangers and little recompense attending the toils and struggles of a patriot. The only emotion of any weight with him was the remembrance of and desire of avenging petty injuries, fancying and aggravating them when, in fact, none was intended.

Very different was the character of the Earl of Buchan; morose, fierce, his natural hardness of disposition unsoftened by one whisper of chivalry, although educated in the best school of knighthood, and continually the follower of King Edward, he adhered to him first, simply because his estates in England was far more to his taste than those in Scotland, towards which he felt no filial tie, and soon after his marriage, repugnance to his high-minded and richly-gifted countess, which ever seemed a reproach and slur upon himself, kept him still more aloof, satisfied that the close retirement in which she lived, the desert and rugged situation of his castle, would effectually debar her from using that influence he knew she possessed, and keep her wholly and solely his own; a strange kind of feeling, when in reality, the wide contrast between them made her an object of dislike, only to be accounted for by the fact that a dark, suspicious, jealous temper was ever at work within him.

"Now, do but look at that fellow's doublet, Comyn. Look, how gay they pass below, and here am I, with my new richly-broidered suit, with which I thought to brave it with the best of them—here am I, I say, pent up in stone walls like a caged goldfinch, 'stead of the entertainment I had pictured; 'tis enough to chafe the spirit of a saint."

"And 'canst thou think of such things now, thou sorry fool?"

demanding Buchan, sternly pausing in his hurried stride up and down the narrow precincts of the chamber; "hast thou no worthier subject for contemplation?"

"None, save thy dutiful wife's most dutiful conduct, Comyn, which, being the less agreeable of the two, I dismiss the first. I owe her small thanks for playing the representative of my house; methinks, her imprisonment would better serve King Edward's cause and ours too."

"Aye, imprisonment—imprisonment for life," muttered the earl, slowly. "Let but King Edward restore me my good sword, and he may wreak his vengeance on her as he listeth. Not all the castles of Scotland, the arms of Scottish men, dare guard a wife against her husband; bitterly shall she rue this deed."

"And thy son, my gentle kinsman, what wilt thou do with him, bethink thee? Thou wilt find him as great a rebel as his mother; I have ever told thee thou wert a fool to leave him so long with his brainstruck mother."

"She hath not, she dared not bring him with her to the murderer of his kinsman—Duncan of Fife, I tell thee she dare not; but if she hath, why he is but a child, a mere boy, incapable of forming judgment one way or the other."

"Not so much a child as thou thinkest, my good lord; some sixteen years or so have made a stalwart warrior ere this. Be warned, send off a trusty messenger to the Tower of Buchan, and, without any time for warning, bring that boy as the hostage of thy good faith and loyalty to Edward; thou wilt thus cure him of his patriotic fancies, and render thine interest secure, and as thou desirest to reward thy dutiful partner, thou wilt do it effectually; for, trust me, that boy is the very apple of her eye, in her affections her very doating-place."

"Jest not, Duncan, or by all the saints thou wilt drive me mad!" wrathfully exclaimed Buchan. "It shall be as thou sayest; and more, I will gain the royal warrant for the deed—permission to this effect may shorten this cursed confinement for us both. I have forgotten the boy's age; his mother's high-sounding patriotism may have tintured him already. Thou smilest."

"At thy marvellous good faith in thy wife's patriotism, good kinsman—oh, well perchance, like charity, it covereth a multitude of sins."

"What meanest thou, my Lord of Fife?" demanded Buchan, shortly and abruptly, pausing in his walk to face his companion, his suspicious temper instantly aroused by Fife's peculiar tone. "What wouldst thou insinuate? Tamper not with me; thou knowest I am no subject for a jest."

"I have but to look on thee to know that, my most solemn-visaged brother. I neither insinuate nor tamper with your lordship. Simply and heartily I do but give thee joy for thy faith in female patriotism," answered Fife carelessly, but with an expression of countenance that did not accord with his tone.

"What, in the fiend's name, then, has urged her to this mad act, if it be not what she and others as mad as she call patriotism?"

"May not a lurking affection for the Bruce have given incentive to love of country? Buchan, of a truth, thou art dull as a sword-blade when plunged in muddy water."

"Affection for the Bruce? Thou art as mad as she is, Duncan. What the foul fiend, knows she of the Bruce? No, no! 'tis too wild a tale—when have they ever met?"

"More often than thou listeth, gentle kinsman," returned Fife, with just sufficient show of mystery to lash his companion into fury. "I could tell thee of a time when Robert of Carrick was domesticated with my immaculate sister, hunting with her, hawking with her, reading with her, making favourable impressions on every heart in Fife Castle save mine own."

"And she loved him!—she was loved," muttered Buchan; "and she vowed her troth to me, the foul-mouthed traitress! She loved him, saidst thou?"

"On my faith, I know not, Comyn. Rumours, I know, went abroad that it would have been better for the Lady Isabella's peace and honour if this gallant, fair-spoken knight had kept aloof."

"And thou, her brother, carest not to speak these things, and in that reckless tone? By St. Swithin, ye are well matched," returned Buchan, with a short and bitter laugh of scorn.

"Faith, Comyn, I love my own life and comfort too well to stand up the champion of woman's honour; besides I vouch not for the truth of floating rumours. I tell thee

but what comes across my brain ; for its worth thou art the best judge."

"I were a fool to mine own interest to doubt thee now, little worth as are thy words in common," again muttered the incensed earl, resuming his hasty strides. "Patriotism ! loyalty ! ha, ha ! high-sounding words, forsooth. And have they not met since then until now ?" he demanded, stopping suddenly before his companion.

"Even so, fair kinsman. Whilst thou wert doing such loyal duty to Edward, after the battle of Falkirk, forgetting thou hadst a wife and castle to look after, Robert Earl of Carrick found a comfortable domicile within thy stone walls, and in the fair, sweet company of thine Isabella, my lord. No doubt, in all honourable and seemly intercourse ; gallant devotion on the one side, and dignified courtesy on the other—nothing more, depend on't ; still it seems but natural that the memory of a comely face and knightly form should prove incentives to loyalty and patriotism."

"The foul fiend take thy jesting !" exclaimed Buchan. "Natural, forsooth ; aye, the same nature that bade me loathe the presence, aye, the very name of that deceiving traitress. And so that smooth-faced villain Carrick found welcome in the castle of a Comyn the months we missed him from the court. Ha, ha ! thou hast done me good service, Lord of Fife. I had not enough of injuries before to demand at the hand of Robert Bruce. And for Dame Isabella, may the fury of every fiend follow me, if I place her not in the hands of Edward, alive or dead ! his wrath will save me the trouble of seeking further vengeance."

"Nay, thou art a very fool to be so chafed," coolly observed Fife. "Thou hast taken no care of thy wife, and therefore hast no right to demand strict account of her amusements in thy absence ; and how do we know she is not as virtuous as the rest of them ? I do but tell thee of these things to pass away the time. Ha ! there goes the prince's Gascon favourite, by mine honour. Gaveston sports it bravely ; look at his crimson mantle wadded with sable. He hath changed his garb since morning. Faith, he is a lucky dog ! the prince's love may be valued at some thousand marks a year—worth possessing, by St. Michael !"

A muttered oath was all the reply which his companion

vouchsafed, nor did the thunder-cloud upon his brow disperse that evening.

The careless recklessness of Fife had no power to lessen in the earl's mind the weight of the shameful charge he had brought against the Countess. Buchan's dark, suspicious mind not alone received it, but cherished it, revelled in it, as giving him that which he had long desired, a good foundation for dislike and jealousy, a well-founded pretence for every species of annoyance and revenge. The Earl of Fife, who had, in fact, merely spoken, as he had said, to while away the time, and for the pleasure of seeing his brother-in-law enraged, thought as little of his words *after* as he had *before* they were uttered. A licentious follower of pleasure in every form himself, he imagined, as such thoughtless characters generally do, that everybody must be like him. From his weak and volatile mind, then, all remembrance of that evening's conversation faded as soon as it was spoken; but with the Earl of Buchan it remained brooding on itself, and filling his dark spirit with yet blacker fancies.

The confinement of the Scottish noblemen was not of long duration. Edward, whose temper, save when his ambition was concerned, was generally just and equitable, discovering, after an impartial examination, that they were in no ways connected with the affairs in the north, and feeling also it was his interest to conciliate the regard of all the Scottish nobles disaffected to Bruce, very soon restored them alike to their personal liberty and to his favour; his courteous apology for unjust suspicion, frankly acknowledging that the news from Scotland, combined with his irritating disease, had rendered him blind and suspicious, at once disarmed Fife of wrath. Buchan, perhaps, had not been so easily appeased, had his mind been less darkly engrossed. His petition, that his son might be sent for, to be placed as a hostage in the hands of Edward, and thus saved from the authority of his mother, whom he represented as an artful, designing woman, possessed of dangerous influence, was acceded to on the instant, and the king's full confidence restored. It was easy to act upon Edward's mind, already incensed against Isabella of Buchan for her daring defiance of his power; and Buchan did work, till he felt perfectly satisfied that the wife he hated would be fully cared for without the very smallest trouble or interference on his

part, save the obtaining possession of her person ; that the vengeance he had vowed would be fully perfected, without any reproach or stigma cast upon his name.

Meantime the exertions of the King of England for the suppression of the rebels continued with unabated ardour. Orders were issued and proclaimed in every part of England for the gathering together one of the noblest and mightiest armies that had ever yet followed him to war. To render it still more splendidly impressive, and give fresh incentive to his subjects, whose warlike spirit he perhaps feared might be somewhat depressed by this constant call upon them for the reduction of a country ever rising in revolt, Edward caused proclamation to be severally made in every important town or county, "that all who were under the obligation to become knights, and possessed the necessary means, should appear at Westminster on the coming solemn season of Whitsuntide, where they should be furnished with every requisite, save and except the trappings for their horses, from the king's wardrobe, and be treated with all solemn honour and distinction as best befitted their rank, and the holy vows they took upon themselves."

A proclamation, such as this, in the very heart of the chivalric era, was all sufficient to engage every Englishman heart and soul in the service of his king ; and ere the few weeks intervening between Easter and Whitsuntide were passed, Westminster and its environs presented a scene of martial magnificence and knightly splendour, which had never before been equalled. Three hundred noble youths, sons of earls, barons and knights, speedily assembled at the place appointed, all attended according to their rank and pretensions ; all hot and fiery spirits, eager to prove by their prompt attendance their desire to accept their sovereign's invitation. The splendour of their attire seemed to demand little increase from the bounty of the king, but nevertheless, fine linen garments, rich purple robes, and superb mantles woven with gold, were bestowed on each youthful candidate, thus strengthening the links which bound him to his chivalric sovereign, by the gratification of his vanity in addition to the envied honours of knighthood. As our tale relates more to Scottish than English history, we may not linger longer on the affairs of South Britain than is absolutely necessary for the clear comprehension of the situation of her

far less flourishing sister. Exciting therefore as was the scene enacted in Westminster, descriptive as it was of the spirit of the age, we are compelled to give it but a hasty glance, and pass on to events of greater moment.

Glorious, indeed, to an eye-witness must have been the ceremony of admitting these noble and valiant youths into the solemn mysteries and chivalric honours of knighthood. On that day the Prince of Wales was first dubbed a knight, and made Duke of Aquitaine ; and so great was the pressure of the crowd, in their eagerness to witness the ceremonial in the abbey, where the prince hastened to confer his newly-received dignity on his companions, that three knights were killed, and several fainted from heat and exhaustion. Strong war-horses were compelled to drive back and divide the pressing crowds, ere the ceremony was allowed to proceed. A solemn banquet succeeded ; and then it was that Edward, whose energy of mind appeared completely to have annihilated disease and weakness of frame, made that extraordinary vow, which it has puzzled both historian and antiquary satisfactorily to explain. The matter of the vow merely betrayed the indomitable spirit of the man, but the manner seemed strange even in that age. Two swans, decorated with golden nets and gilded reeds, were placed in solemn pomp before the king, and he, with imposing fervour, made a solemn vow to the Almighty and the swans, that he would go to Scotland, and living or dead, avenge the murder of Comyn, and the broken faith of the traitorous Scots. Then with that earnestness of voice and majesty of mien for which he was remarkable, he adjured his subjects, one and all, by the solemn fealty they had sworn to him, that if he should die on the journey, they would carry his body into Scotland, and never give it burial till the prince's dominion was established in that country. Eagerly and willingly the nobles gave the required pledge ; and so much earnestness of purpose, so much martial spirit pervaded that gorgeous assembly, that once more did hope prevail in the monarch's breast, once more did he believe his ambitious yearnings would all be fulfilled, and Scotland, rebellious, haughty Scotland, lie crushed and broken at his feet. Once more his dark eye flashed, his proud lip curled with its wonted smiles ; his warrior form, erect and firm as in former days, now spurned the couch of disease, and rode his war-

horse with all the grace and ease of former years. A gallant army, under the command of Aymer de Valence, Earl of Pembroke, had already been despatched towards Scotland, bearing with it the messengers of the Earl of Buchan, armed both with their lord's commands and Edward's warrant for the detention of the young heir of Buchan, and bring him with all honour to the head-quarters of the king. The name of Isabella of Buchan was subjoined to that of the Bruce, and together with all those concerned in his rising proclaimed as traitors, and a price set upon their heads. This done, the king had been enabled to wait with greater tranquillity the assembling of his larger army, and after the ceremonials of Westminster, orders were issued for every earl and baron to proceed with their followers to Carlisle, which was named the head-quarters of the army, there to join their sovereign with his own immediate troops. The Scottish nobles Edward's usual policy retained in honourable posts about his person, not choosing to trust their fidelity beyond the reach of his own eye.

Obedient to these commands, all England speedily appeared in motion, the troops of every county moving as by one impulse to Carlisle. Yet there were some of England's noblest barons in whose breasts a species of admiration, even affection, was at work towards the very man they were now marching to destroy, and this was frequently the case in the ages of chivalry. Fickle as the character of Robert Bruce had appeared to be, there was that in it which had ever attracted, riveted the regard of many of the noble spirits in King Edward's court. The rash daring of his enterprise, the dangers which encircled him, were such as dazzled and fascinated the imaginations of those knights in whom the true spirit of chivalry found rest. Pre-eminent amongst these was the noble Earl of Gloucester. His duty to his sovereign urged him to take the field; his attachment for the Bruce would have held him neuter, for the ties that bound brothers in arms were of no common or wavering nature. Brothers in blood had frequently found themselves opposed horse to horse and lance to lance on the same field, and no scruples of conscience, no pleadings of affection had power to avert the unnatural strife; but not such was it with brothers in arms—a link strong as adamant, pure as their own sword-steel bound their hearts

as one ; and rather, much rather would Gloucester have laid down his own life, than expose himself to the fearful risk of staining his sword with the blood of his friend. The deepest dejection took possession of his soul, which not all the confidence of his sovereign, the gentle affectionate pleadings of his wife could in any way assuage.

CHAPTER VIII.

It was the month of June, and the beautiful county of Perth smiled in all the richness and loveliness of early summer. Not yet had the signal of war floated on the pure springy breeze, not yet had the stains of blood desecrated the gladsome earth, although the army of De Valence was now within very few miles of Scone, which was still the headquarters of the Scottish king. Aware of the very great disparity of numbers between his gallant followers and those of Pembroke, King Robert preferred entrenching himself in his present guarded situation, to meeting De Valence in the open field, although more than once tempted to do so, and finding extreme difficulty in so curbing the dauntless spirit of his followers as to incline them more towards the defensive than the attack. Already had the fierce thunders of the Church been launched against him for the sin of murder committed in consecrated ground. Excommunication in all its horrors exposed him to death from any hand, that on any pretence of private hate or public weal, might choose to strike ; but already had there arisen spirits bold enough to dispute the awful mandates of the Pope, and the patriotic prelates who had before acknowledged and done homage to their sovereign, now neither wavered in their allegiance nor in any way sought to promulgate the sentence thundered against him. A calm smile had passed over the Bruce's noble features as the intelligence of the wrath of Rome was communicated to him.

"The judge and the avenger is in heaven, holy father," he said ; "to His hands I commit my cause, conscious of deserving, as humbly awaiting, chastisement for that sin which none can reprobate and abhor more strongly than myself ; if blood must flow for blood, His will be done. I ask but to free my

country, to leave her in powerful yet righteous hands, and willingly I will depart, confident of mercy for my soul."

Fearful, however, that this sentence might dispirit his subjects, King Robert watched his opportunity of assembling and addressing them. In a brief yet eloquent speech he narrated the base cold-blooded system of treachery of Comyn; how, when travelling to Scotland, firmly trusting in and depending on the good faith the traitor had so solemnly pledged, a brawl had arisen between his (Bruce's) followers and some men in the garb of Borderers, who were discovered to be emissaries of the Red Comyn, and how papers had been found on them, in which all that could expose the Bruce to the deadly wrath of Edward was revealed, and his very death advised as the only effectual means of quelling his efforts for the freedom of Scotland, and crushing the last hopes of her still remaining patriots. He told them how, on the natural indignation excited by this black treachery subsiding, he had met Sir John Comyn at Dumfries—how, knowing the fierce irascibility of his natural temper, he had willingly agreed that the interview Comyn demanded should take place in the church of the Minorite Friars, trusting that the sanctity of the place would be sufficient to restrain him.

"But who may answer for himself, my friends?" he continued, mournfully; "it needs not to dilate on that dark and stormy interview, suffice it that the traitor sought still to deceive, still to win me by his specious sophistry to reveal my plans, again to be betrayed, and that when I taunted him with his base, cowardly treachery, his black dishonour, words of wrath and hate, and blind deluded passion arose between us, and the spirit of evil at work within me urged my rash sword to strike. Subjects and friends, I plead no temptation as excuse, I make no defence; I deplore, I condemn the deed. If ye deem me worthy of death, if ye believe the sentence of our holy father in God, his Holiness the Pope, be just, that it is wholly free from the machinations of England, who, deeming force of arms not sufficient, would hurl the wrath of heaven's vicegerent on my devoted head, go, leave me to the fate it brings; your oath of allegiance is dissolved. I have yet faithful followers, to make one bold stand against the tyrant, and die for Scotland; but if ye absolve me, if ye will yet give me

your hearts and swords, oh, fear me not, my countrymen, we may yet be free !”

Cries, tears, and blessings followed this wisely-spoken appeal, one universal shout reiterated their vows of allegiance ; those who had felt terrified at the mandate of their spiritual father, now traced it not to his impartial judgment, but to the schemes of Edward, and instantly felt its weight and magnitude had faded into air. The unwavering loyalty of the Primate of Scotland, the Bishop of Glasgow, and the Abbot of Scone strengthened them alike in their belief and allegiance, and a band of young citizens were instantly provided with arms at the expense of the town, and the king entreated by a deputation of the principal magistrates to accept their services as a guard extraordinary, lest his life should be yet more endangered from private individuals, by the sentence under which he laboured, and gratified by their devotedness, though his bold spirit spurned all fear of secret assassination, their request was graciously accepted.

The ceremony of knighthood which the king had promised to confer on several of his young followers had been deferred until the present time, to admit of their preparing for their inauguration with all the solemn services of religion which the rites enjoined.

The 15th day of June was the time appointed, and Nigel Bruce and Alan of Buchan were to pass the night previous, in solemn prayer and vigil, in the abbey church of Scone. That the rules of chivalry should not be transgressed by his desire to confer some honour on the son of the Countess of Buchan, which would demonstrate the high esteem in which she was held by her sovereign, Alan had served the king, first as page and then as esquire, in the interval that had elapsed since his coronation, and now he beheld with ardour the near completion of the honour for which he pined. His spirit had been wrung well-nigh to agony, when amidst the list of the proscribed as traitors he beheld his mother's name ; not so much at the dangers that would encircle her—for from those he might defend her—but that his father was still a follower of the unmanly tyrant, who would even war against a woman—his father should still calmly assist and serve the man who set a price upon his mother's head. Alas ! poor boy, he little knew that father's heart.

It was evening, a still, oppressive evening, for though the sun yet shone brightly as he sunk in the west, a succession of black thunder-clouds, gradually rising higher and higher athwart the intense blue of the firmament, seemed to threaten that the wings of the tempest were already brooding on the dark bosom of night. The very flowers appeared to droop beneath the weight of the atmosphere; the trees moved not, the birds were silent, save when now and then a solitary note was heard, and then hushed, as if the little warbler shrunk back in his leafy nest, frightened at his own voice. Perchance it was the stillness of nature which had likewise affected the inmates of a retired chamber in the palace, for though they sate side by side, and their looks betrayed that the full communion of soul was not denied, few words were spoken. The maiden of Buchan bent over the frame which contained the blue satin scarf she was embroidering with the device of Bruce, in gold and gems, and it was Nigel Bruce who sate beside her, his deep, expressive eyes fixed upon her in such fervid, such eloquent love, that seldom was it she ventured to raise her glance to his. A alight shadow was on those sweet and gentle features, perceptible, perchance, to the eye of love alone; and it was this that, after enjoying that silent communion of the spirit, so dear to those who love, which bade Nigel fling his arm around that slender form, and ask—

“What is it, sweet one? why art thou sad?”

“Do not ask me, Nigel, for indeed I know not,” she answered, simply, looking up a moment in his face, in that sweet touching confidence, which made him draw her closer to his protecting heart; “save that, perchance, the oppression of nature has extended to me, and filled my soul with unfounded fancies of evil. I ought to be very happy, Nigel, loved thus by thee,” she hid her eyes upon his bosom; “received as thy promised bride, not alone by thy kind sisters, thy noble brothers, but—simple-hearted maiden as I am—deemed worthy of *thee* by good King Robert’s self. Nigel, dearest Nigel, why, in an hour of joy like this, should dreams of evil come?”

“To whisper, my beloved, that not on earth may we look for the perfection of joy, the fulness of bliss; that while the mortal shell is round us joy is chained to pain, and granted

us but to lift up the spirit to that heaven where pain is banished, bliss made perfect; dearest, 'tis but for this!" answered the young enthusiast, and the rich yet somewhat, mournful tones of his voice thrilled to his listener's heart.

"Thou speakest as if thou, too, hadst experienced forebodings like to these, my Nigel," said Agnes, thoughtfully. "I deemed them but the foolishness of my weaker mind."

"Deem them not foolishness, beloved. There are minds indeed, that know them not, but they are of that rude, coarse material which owns no thought, hath no hopes but those of earth and earthly things, insensible to that profundity of joy which makes us *feel* its *chain*: 'tis not to the lightly feeling such forebodings come."

"But thou—hast thou felt them, Nigel, dearest? hast thou listened to, *believed* their voice?"

"I have felt, I feel when I gaze on thee, sweet one, a joy so deep, so full, that I scarce can trace it to an earthly cause," he said, slightly evading a direct answer. "I cannot look forward and, as it were, extend that deep joy to the future; but the fetter binding it to pain reminds me I am mortal, that not on earth may I demand and seek and hope to find its fulfilment."

She looked up in his face, with an expression both of bewilderment and fear, and her hand unconsciously closed on his arm, as thus to detain him to her side.

"Yes, my beloved," he added, with more animation, "it is not because I put not my trust in earth for unfading joy that we shall find not its sweet flowers below; that our paths on earth may be darkened, because the fulness of bliss is alone to be found in heaven. Mine own sweet Agnes, while darkness and strife, and blood and death, are thus at work around us, is it marvel we should sometimes dream of sorrow? Yet, oh yet, have we not both the same hope, the same God, the same home in heaven; and if our doom be to part on earth, shall we not, oh, shall we not meet in bliss? I say not such things will be, my best beloved; but better look thus upon the dim shadow sometimes resting on the rosy wings of joy, than ever dismiss it as the vain folly of a weakened mind."

He pressed his lips, which quivered, on the fair, beautiful brow then resting in irresistible sorrow on his bosom; but he did not attempt by words to check that maiden's sudden

burst of tears. After a while, when he found his own emotion sufficiently restrained, soothingly and fondly he cheered her to composure, and drew from her the thoughts which had disturbed her when he first spoke.

"'Twas of my mother, Nigel, of my beloved, my noble mother that I thought; proscribed, hunted, set a price upon as a traitor. Can her children think on such indignity without emotion—and when I remember the great power of King Edward, who has done this—without fear for her fate?"

"Sweetest, fear not for her; her noble deed, her dauntless heroism has circled her with such a guard of gallant knights and warriors, that, in the hands of Edward, trust me, dearest, she shall never fall; and even if such should be, still, I say, fear not. Unpitying and cruel as Edward is, where his ambition is concerned, he is too true a knight, too noble in spirit to take a woman's blood; he is now fearfully enraged, and therefore has he done this. And as to indignity, 'tis shame to the proscriber not to the proscribed, my love!"

"There is one I fear yet more than Edward," continued the maiden, fearfully, "one that I should love more. Oh, Nigel, my very spirit shrinks from the image of my father. I have sought to love him, to dismiss the dark haunting visions which his name has ever brought before me. I saw him once, but once, and his stern, terrible features and harsh voice so terrified my childish fancies, that I hid myself till he had departed, and I have never seen him since, and yet, oh yet, I fear him!"

"What is it that thou fearest, love?"

"I know not," she answered; "but if evil approach my mother, it will come from him, and so silently, so unsuspectedly, that none may avoid it. Nigel, he cannot love my mother! he is a foe to Bruce, a friend of the slaughtered Comyn, and will he not demand a stern account of the deed that she hath done? will he not seek vengeance? and oh, will he not, may he not in wrath part thee and me, and thus thy bodings be fulfilled?"

"Agnes, never! The mandate of man shall *never* part us; the power of man, unless my limbs be chained, shall never sever thee and me. He that hath never acted a father's part, can have no power on his child. Thou art mine, my beloved!—mine with thy mother's blessing; and

mine thou shalt be—no earthly power shall part us. Death, death alone can break the links that bind us, and must be of God, though man may seem the cause. Be comforted, sweet love. Hark! they are chiming vespers; I must be gone for the solemn vigil of to-night, and to-morrow thou shalt arm thine own true knight, mine Agnes, and deck me with that blue scarf, more precious even than the jewelled sword my sovereign brother gives. Farewell, for a brief, brief while; I go to watch and pray. Oh, let thy orisons attend me, and surely then my vigil shall be blest."

"Pray thou for me, my Nigel," whispered the trembling girl, as he clasped her in his arms, "that true as I may be, strength befitting thy promised bride may be mine own. Nigel, my beloved, indeed I need such prayer."

He whispered hope and comfort, and departed by the stone stairs which led from the gothic casement where they had been sitting, into the garden; he lingered to gather some delicate blue bells which had just blown, and turned back to place them in the lap of Agnes. She eagerly raised them and pressed them to her lips, but either their fragile blossoms could not bear even her soft touch, or the heavy air had inwardly withered their bloom, for the blossoms fell from their stalks, and scattered their beautiful petals at her feet.

CHAPTER IX.

THE hour of vespers had come and passed; the organ and choir had hushed their solemn sounds. The abbot and his attendant monks, the king who, with his train, had that evening joined the solemn service, all had departed, and but two inmates were left within the abbey church of Scone. Darkness and silence had assumed their undisturbed dominion, for the waxen tapers left burning on the altar lighted but a few yards round, leaving the nave and cloisters in impenetrable gloom. Some twenty or thirty yards east of the altar, elevated some paces from the ground, in its light and graceful shrine, stood an elegantly sculptured figure of the Virgin and Child. A silver lamp, whose pure flame was fed with aromatic incense, burned within the shrine, and shed its soft

- light on a suit of glittering armour which was hanging on the shaft of a pillar close beside it. Directly behind the altar was a large oriel window of stained glass, representing subjects from Scripture. The window, with its various mullions and lights, formed one high pointed arch, marked by solid stone pillars on each side, the capitals of which traced the commencement of the arch. Another window, similar in character, though somewhat smaller in dimensions, lighted the west end of the church; and near it stood another shrine containing a figure of St. Stephen, lighted as was that of the Virgin and Child, and, like that, gleaming on a suit of armour, and on the figure of the youthful candidate for knighthood, whose task was to pass that night in prayer and vigil beside his armour, unarmed, save by that panoply of proof which is the Christian's portion—faith, lowliness and prayer.

No word passed between these pledged brothers in arms. Their watch was in opposite ends of the church, and save the dim, solemn light of the altar, darkness and immeasurable space seemed to stretch between them. Faintly and fitfully the moon had shone through one of the long narrow windows of the aisles, shedding its cold spectral light for a brief space, then passing into darkness. Heavy masses of clouds sailed slowly in the heavens, dimly discernible through the unpainted panes; the oppression of the atmosphere increasing as the night approached her zenith, and ever and anon a low, long peal of distant thunder, each succeeding one becoming longer and louder than the last, and heralded by the blue flash of vivid lightning, announced the fury of the coming tempest.

The imaginations even as the feelings of the young men were already strongly excited, although their thoughts, perchance, were less akin than might have been expected. The form of his mother passed not from the mental vision of the young heir of Buchan: the tone of her voice, the unwonted tear which had fallen on his cheek when he had knelt before her that evening, ere he had departed to his post, craving her blessing on his vigil, her prayers for him—that tone, that tear, lingered on his memory, hallowing every dream of glory, every warrior hope that entered in his soul. Internally he vowed he would raise the banner of his race, and prove the loyalty, the patriotism, the glowing love of

liberty which her counsels, her example had planted in his breast; and if the recollection of his mother's precarious situation as a proscribed traitor to Edward, and of his father's desertion of his country and her patriot king in his adherence to a tyrant—if these reflections came to damp the bright glowing views of others, they did but call the indignant blood to his cheek, and add greater firmness to his impatient step, for yet more powerfully did they awake his indignation against Edward. Till now he had looked upon him exclusively in the light of Scotland's foe—one against whom he with all true Scottish men must raise their swords, or live for ever 'neath the brand of slaves and cowards; but now a personal cause of anger added fuel to the fire already burning in his breast. His mother was proscribed—a price set upon her head; and as if to fill the measure of his cup of bitterness to overflowing, his own father, he who should have been her protector, aided and abetted the cruel, pitiless Edward. Traitor! Isabella of Buchan a traitress! the noblest, purest, bravest amid Scotland's children. She who to him had ever seemed all that was pure and good, and noblest in woman; and most noble and patriot-hearted now, in the fulfilment of an office inherent in the House of Fife. Agitated beyond expression, quicker and quicker he strode up and down the precincts marked for his watch, the increasing tempest without seeming to assimilate strangely with the storm within. Silence would have irritated, would have chafed those restless smartings into very agony, but the wild war of the elements, while they roused his young spirit into yet stronger energy, removed its pain.

"It matters not," his train of thought continued, "while this brain can think, this heart can feel, this arm retain its strength, Isabella of Buchan needs no other guardian but her son. It is as if years had left their impress on my heart, as if I had grown in very truth to man, thinking with man's wisdom, fighting with man's strength. He that hath never given a father's love, hath never done a father's duty, hath no claim upon his child; but she, whose untiring devotion, whose faithful love hath watched over me, guarded, blessed from the first hour of my life, instilled within me the principles of life on earth and immortality in heaven—mother! mother! will not thy gentle virtues cling

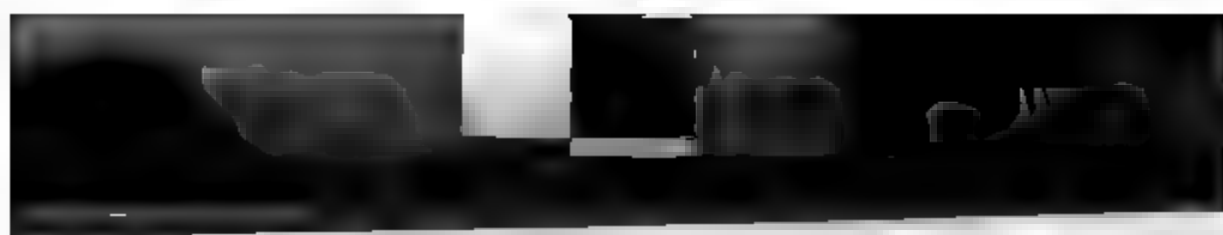
around thy boy, and save him even from a father's curse? Can I do else than devote the life thou gavest, to thee, and render back with my stronger arm, but not less firm soul, the care, protection, love thou hast bestowed on me? Mother, Virgin saint," he continued aloud, flinging himself before the shrine to which we have alluded, "hear, oh, hear my prayer! Intercede for me above, that strength, prudence, wisdom may be granted me in the accomplishment of my knightly vows; that my mother, my own mother may be the first and dearest object of my heart; life, fame, and honour I dedicate to her. Spare me, bless me but for her; if danger, imprisonment be unavailingly her doom, let not my spirit waver, nor my strength flag, nor courage nor foresight fail, till she is rescued to liberty and life."

Wrapt in the deep earnest might of prayer, the boy remained kneeling, with clasped hands, and eyes fixed on the Virgin's sculptured face, his spirit inwardly communing, long, long after his impassioned vows had sunk in silence; the thunder yet rolled fearfully, and the blue lightning flashed and played around him with scarce a minute's intermission, but no emotion save that of a son and warrior took possession of his soul. He knew a terrific storm was raging round him, but it drew him not from earthly thoughts and earthly feelings, even while it raised his soul in prayer. Very different was the effect of this lonely vigil and awful night on the imaginative spirit of his companion.

It was not alone the spirit of chivalry which now burned in the noble heart of Nigel Bruce. He was a poet, and the glowing hues of poesie invested every emotion of his mind. He loved deeply, devotedly; and love, pure, faithful, hopeful love, appeared to have increased every feeling, whether of grief or joy, in intensity and depth. He felt too deeply to be free from that peculiar whispering within, known by the world as presentiment, and as such so often scorned and condemned as the mere offspring of weak, superstitious minds, when it is in reality one of those distinguishing marks of the higher, more ethereal temperament of genius.

Perchance it is the lively imagination of such minds, which in the very midst of joy can so vividly portray and realize pain, or it may be, indeed, the mysterious voice which links gifted man with a higher class of beings to





whom futurity is revealed. Be this as it may, even while the youthful patriot beheld with a visioned eye the liberty of his country, and rejoiced in thus beholding, there ever came a dim and silent shadowing, a whispering voice, that he should indeed behold it, but not from earth. When the devoted brother and loyal subject pictured his sovereign in very truth a free and honoured king, his throne surrounded by nobles and knights of his own free land, and many others, the enthusiast saw not himself amongst them, and yet he rejoiced in the faith such things would be. When the young and ardent lover sate by the side of his betrothed, gazing on her sweet face, and drinking in deeply the gushing tide of joy, when his spirit pictured yet dearer, lovelier, more assured bliss, when Agnes would be in very truth his own, still did that strange thrilling whisper come, and promise he should indeed experience such bliss, but not on earth; and yet he loved, aye, and rejoiced, and there came not one shadow on his bright, beautiful face, not one sad echo in the rich, deep tones of his melodious voice to betray such dim forebodings had found resting in his soul.

Already excited by his conversation with Agnes, the service in which he found himself engaged was not such as to tranquillize his spirit, or still his full heart's quivering throb. His imaginative soul had already flung its halo over the solemn rites which attended his inauguration as a knight. Even to less enthusiastic spirits there was a glow, a glory in this ceremony which seldom failed to awake the soul, and inspire it with high and noble sentiments. It was not therefore strange that these emotions should in the heart of Nigel Bruce obtain that ascendancy, which to sensitive minds must become pain. Had it been a night of calm and holy stillness, he would in all probability have felt its soothing effect; but as it was, every pulse throbbed and every nerve was strained 'neath his strong sense of the sublime. He could not be said to think, although he had struggled long and fiercely to compose his mind for those devotional exercises he deemed most fitted for the hour. Feeling alone possessed him, overwhelming, indefinable; he deemed it admiration, awe, adoration of Him at whose nod the mighty thunders rolled and the destructive lightnings flashed, but he could not define it such. He did not dream of earth, not even the form of Agnes flashed, as was its wont, before

him; no, it was of scenes and sounds undreamed of in earth's philosophy he thought, and as he gazed on the impenetrable darkness, and then beheld it dispersed by the repeated lightning, his excited fancy almost believed that he should see it peopled by the spirits of the mighty dead which slept within those walls, and no particle of terror attended this belief. In the weak superstition of his age, Nigel Bruce had never shared, but firmly and steadfastly he believed, even in his calm and unexcited moments, that there was a link between the living and the dead; that the freed spirits of the one were permitted to hold commune with the other, not in visible shape, but in those thrilling whispers which the spirit knows, while yet it would deny them even to itself. It was the very age of superstition; religion itself was clothed in a veil of solemn mystery, which to minds constituted as Nigel's gave it a deeper, more impressive tone. Its ceremonies, its shrines, its fictions, all gave fresh zest to the imagination, and filled the heart of its votary with a species of devotion and excitement, which would now be considered as mere visionary madness, little in accordance with the true spirit of piety or acceptable to the Most High, but which was then regarded as meritorious; and even as we look back upon the saints and heroes of the past, even now should not be condemned; for, according to the light bestowed, so is devotion demanded and accepted by the God of all.

Nigel Bruce had paused in his hasty walk, and leaning against the pillar round which his armour hung, fixed his eyes for a space on the large oriel window we have named, whose outline was but faintly discernible, save on the left side, which was dimly illumined by the silver lamp burning in the shrine of St. Stephen, close beside which the youthful warrior stood. The storm had suddenly sunk into an awful and almost portentous silence, and in that brief interval of stillness and gloom Nigel felt his blood flow more calmly in his veins, his pulses stilled their starting throbs, and the young soldier crossed his arms on his breast, and bent his uncovered head upon them in silent yet earnest prayer.

The deep, solemn chime of the abbey bell, echoed like a spirit-voice through the arched and silent church, roused him, and he looked up. At the same moment a strong and

awfully brilliant flash of lightning darted through the window on which his eyes were fixed, followed by a mighty peal of thunder, longer and louder than any that had come before. For above a minute that blue flash lingered playing, it seemed, on steel, and a cold shuddering thrill crept through the frame of Nigel Bruce, sending the life-blood from his cheek back to his very heart, for either fancy had again assumed her sway, and more vividly than before, or his wild thoughts had found a shape and semblance. Within the arch formed by the high window stood or seemed to stand a tall and knightly form, clad from the gorget to the heel in polished steel; his head was bare, and long, dark hair shaded a face pale and shadowy indeed, but strikingly and eminently noble; there was a scarf across his breast, and on it Nigel recognised the cognizance of his own line, the crest and motto of the Bruce. It could not have been more than a minute that the blue lightning lingered there, yet to his excited spirit it was long enough to impress indelibly and startingly every trace of that strange vision upon his heart. The face was turned to his, with a solemn yet sorrowful earnestness of expression, and the mailed hand raised on high, seemed pointing unto heaven. The flash passed and all was darkness, the more dense and impenetrable, from the vivid light which had preceded it; but Nigel stirred not, moved not, his every sense absorbed, not in the weakness of mortal terror, but in one overwhelming sensation of awe, which, while it oppressed the spirit well-nigh to pain, caused it to long with an almost sickening intensity for a longer and clearer view of that which had come and passed with the lightning flash. Again the vivid blaze dispersed the gloom, but no shadow met his fixed impassioned gaze. Vision or reality, the form was gone; there was no trace, no sign of that which had been. For several successive flashes Nigel remained gazing on the spot where the mailed form had stood, as if he felt it would, it must again appear; but as time sped, and he saw but space, the soul relaxed from its high-wrought mood, the blood, which had seemed stagnant in his veins, rushed back tumultuously through its varied channels, and Nigel Bruce prostrated himself before the altar, to wrestle with his perturbed spirit till it found calm in prayer.

A right noble and glorious scene did the great hall of the

palace present the morning which followed this eventful night. The king, surrounded by his highest prelates and nobles, mingling indiscriminately with the high-born dames and maidens of his court, all splendidly attired, occupied the upper part of the hall, the rest of which was crowded both by his military followers and many of the good citizens of Scone, who flocked in great numbers to behold the august ceremony of the day. Two immense oaken doors at the south side of the hall were flung open, and through them was discerned the large space forming the palace-yard, prepared as a tilting-ground, where the new-made knights were to prove their skill. The storm had given place to a soft breezy morning, the cool freshness of which appearing peculiarly grateful from the oppressiveness of the night; light downy clouds sailed over the blue expanse of heaven, tempering without clouding the brilliant rays of the sun. Every face was clothed with smiles, and the loud shouts which hailed the youthful candidates for knighthood, as they severally entered, told well the feeling with which the patriots of Scotland were regarded.

Some twenty youths received the envied honour at the hand of their sovereign this day, but our limits forbid a minute scrutiny of the bearing of any, however well deserving, save of the two whose vigils have already detained us so long. A yet longer and louder shout proclaimed the appearance of the youngest scion of the house of Bruce, and his companion. The daring patriotism of Isabella of Buchan had enshrined her in every heart, and so disposed all men towards her children, that the name of their traitorous father was forgotten.

Led by their godfathers, Nigel by his brother-in-law, Sir Christopher Seaton, and Alan by the Earl of Lennox, their swords, which had been blessed by the abbot at the altar, slung round their necks, they advanced up the hall. There was a glow on the cheek of the young Alan, in which pride and modesty were mingled; his step at first was unsteady, and his lip was seen to quiver from very bashfulness, as he first glanced round the hall and felt that every eye was turned towards him; but when that glance met his mother's fixed on him, and breathing that might of love which filled her heart, all boyish tremors fled, the calm staid resolve of manhood took

the place of the varying glow upon his cheek, the quivering lip became compressed and firm, and his step faltered not again.

The cheek of Nigel Bruce was pale, but there was firmness in the glance of his bright eye, and a smile unclouded in its joyance on his lip. The frivolous lightness of the courtier, the mad bravado of knight-errantry, which was not uncommon to the times, indeed, were not there. It was the quiet courage of the resolved warrior, the calm of a spirit at peace with itself, shedding its own high feeling and poetic glory over all around him.

On reaching the foot of King Robert's throne, both youths knelt and laid their sheathed swords at his feet. Their armour-bearers then approached, and the ceremony of clothing the candidates in steel commenced; the golden spur was fastened on the left foot of each by his respective godfather, while Athol, Hay, and other nobles advanced to do honour to the youths, by aiding in the ceremony; nor was it warriors alone.

"Is this permitted, lady?" demanded the king, smiling, as the Countess of Buchan approached the martial group, and, aided by Lennox, fastened the polished cuirass on the form of her son. "Is it premitted for a matron to arm a youthful knight? Is there no maiden to do such inspiring office?"

"Yes, when the knight be one as this, my liege," she answered, in the same tone; "let a matron arm him, good my liege," she added, sadly, "let a mother's hand enwrap his boyish limbs in steel, a mother's blessing mark him thine and Scotland's, that those who watch his bearing in the battle-field may know who sent him there, may thrill his heart with memories of her who stands alone of her ancestral line, that though he bears the name of Comyn, the blood of Fife flows reddest in his veins."

"Arm him and welcome, noble lady," answered the king, and a buzz of approbation ran through the hall, "and may thy noble spirit and dauntless loyalty inspire him; we shall not need a trusty follower while such as he are round us. Yet, in very deed, my youthful knight must have a lady fair for whom he tilts to-day. Come hither, Isoline; thou lookest verily inclined to envy thy sweet friend her office, and nothing loth to have a loyal knight thyself. Come,

come, my pretty one, no blushing now. Lennox, guide those tiny hands aright."

Laughing and blushing, Isoline, the daughter of Lady Campbell, a sister of the Bruce, a graceful child of some thirteen summers, advanced, nothing loth, to obey her royal uncle's summons, and an arch smile of real enjoyment irresistibly stole over the countenance of Alan, dispersing the emotion his mother's words produced.

"Nay, tremble not, sweet one," the king continued, in a lower and yet kinder tone, as he turned from the one youth to the other, and observed that Agnes, overpowered by emotion, had scarcely power to perform her part, despite the whispered words of encouraging affection Nigel murmured in her ear. Imaginative to a degree, which, by her quiet, subdued manners, was never suspected, the simple act of those early flowers withering in her grasp, fresh as they were from the hand of her betrothed, had weighed down her spirits as with an indefinable sense of pain, which she could not combat. The war of the elements, attending as it did the vigil of her lover, had not decreased these feelings, and the morning found her dispirited and shrinking in sensitiveness from the very scene she had anticipated with joy.

"It must not be with a trembling hand the betrothed of a Bruce arms her chosen knight, fair Agnes," continued the king, cheerfully. "She must inspire him with valour and confidence. Smile, then, gentlest and loveliest; we would have all smiles to-day."

And she did smile, but it was a smile of tears, gleaming on her beautiful face as a sunny beam through a glistening spray. One by one the cuirass and shoulder-pieces, the greaves and gauntlets, the gorget and brassards, the joints of which were so beautifully burnished that they shone as mirrors, and so flexible every limb had its free use, enveloped those manly forms. Their swords once again girt to their sides, and once more kneeling, the king descended from his throne, and alternately dubbed them knight in the name of God, St. Michael, and St. George.

"Be faithful, brave, and hardy, youthful cavaliers," he said; "true to the country which claims ye, to the monarch ye have sworn to serve, to the knight from whose sword

ye have received the honour ye have craved. Remember, 'tis not the tourney nor the tilted field in which ye will gain renown. For your country let your swords be drawn; against her foes reap laurels. Sir Nigel, 'tis thine to retain unsullied the name thou bearest, to let the Bruce be glorified in thee. And thou, Sir Alan, 'tis thine to *earn* a name—in very truth to win thy golden spurs; to prove we do no unwise deed, forgetting thy early years, to do honour to thy mother's son."

Lightly and eagerly the new-made knights sprung to their feet, the very clang of their glittering armour ringing gratefully and rejoicingly in their ears. Their gallant steeds, barded and richly caparisoned, held by their esquires, stood neighing and pawing at the foot of the steps leading from the oaken doors.

Without touching the stirrup, both sprung at the same instant in their saddles; the helmet, with its long graceful plume, was quickly donned; the lance and shield received; the pennon adorning the iron head of each lowered a moment in honour to their sovereign, then waved gaily in air, and then each lance was laid in rest; a trumpet sounded, and onwards darted the fiery youths thrice round the lists, displaying a skill and courage in horsemanship which was hailed with repeated shouts of applause. But on the tourney and the banquet which succeeded the ceremony we have described we may not linger, but pass rapidly on to a later period of the same evening.

Sir Nigel and his beautiful betrothed had withdrawn awhile from the glittering scene around them; they had done their part in the graceful dance, and now they sought the comparative solitude and stillness of the flower-gemmed terrace, on which the ball-room opened, to speak unreservedly the thoughts which had filled each heart; perchance there were some yet veiled, for the vision of the preceding night, the strange incongruous fancies it had engendered in the youthful warrior, a solemn vow had buried deep in his own soul, and not even to Agnes, to whom his heart was wont to be revealed, might such thoughts find words; and she shrunk in timidity from avowing the inquietude of her own simple heart, and thus it was that each, for the sake of the other, spoke hopefully and cheerily, and gaily, until at length they were but conscious of mutual and devoted love—the

darkening mists of the future lost in the radiance of the present sun.

A sudden pause in the inspiring music, the quick advance of all the different groups towards one particular spot, had failed perchance to interrupt the happy converse of the lovers, had not Sir Alan hastily approached them, exclaiming, as he did so—

“For the love of heaven! Nigel, forget Agnes for one moment, and come along with me. A messenger from Pembroke has just arrived, bearing a challenge, or something very like it, to his grace the king; and it may be we shall win our spurs sooner than we looked for this morning. The sight of Sir Henry Seymour makes the war-trumpet sound in mine ears. Come, for truly there is something astir.”

With Agnes still leaning on his arm, Nigel obeyed the summons of his impatient friend, and joined the group around the king. There was a quiet dignity in the attitude and aspect of Robert, or it might be the daring patriotism of his enterprise was appreciated by the gallant English knight; certain it was that, though Sir Henry's bearing had been somewhat haughty, his brow knit, and his head still covered, as he passed up the hall, by an irresistible impulse he doffed his helmet as he met the eagle glance of the Bruce, and bowed his head respectfully before him, an example instantly followed by his attendants.

“Sir Henry Seymour is welcome to our court,” said the king, courteously; “welcome, whatever message he may bear. How fares it with the chivalric knight and worthy gentleman, Aymer de Valence, Earl of Pembroke? Ye bring us a message from him, 'tis said. Needs it a private hearing, sir knight? if so, we are at your service; yet little is it Aymer de Valence can say to Scotland's king which Scotland may not hear.”

“Pembroke is well, an please you, and sendeth greeting,” replied the knight. “His message, sent as it is to the Bruce, is well fitted for the ears of his followers, therefore may it be spoken here. He sendeth all loving and knightly greeting unto him known until now as Robert Earl of Carrick, and bids him, an he would proclaim and prove the rights he hath assumed, come forth from the narrow precincts of a palace and town, which ill befit a warrior

of such high renown, and gave him battle in the Park of Methven, near at hand. He challenges him to meet him there, with nobles, knights, and yeomen, who proclaiming Robert Bruce their sovereign, cast down the gauntlet of defiance and rebellion against their rightful king and mine, his grace of England ; he challenges thee, sir knight, or earl, or king, whichever name thou bearest, and dares thee to the field."

"And what if we accept not his daring challenge?" demanded King Robert, sternly, without premitting the expression of his countenance to satisfy in any way the many anxious glances fixed upon it.

"He will proclaim thee coward knight and traitor slave," boldly answered Sir Henry. "In camp or in hall, in lady's bower or tented field, he will proclaim thee recreant ; one that took upon himself the state and pomp of royalty without the spirit to defend and prove it."

"Had he done so by our predecessor, Baliol, he had done well," returned the king, calmly. "Nobles, and knights, and gentlemen," he added, the lion spirit of his race kindling in his eye and cheek, "what say ye in accepting the bold challenge of this courtly earl ? Do we not read your hearts as well as our own ? Ye have chafed and fretted that we have retained ye so long inactive, in very truth your monarch's spirit chafed and fretted too. We will do battle with this knightly foe, and give him, in all chivalric and honourable courtesy, the meeting he desires."

One startling and energetic shout burst simultaneously from the warriors around, forming a wild and thrilling response to their sovereign's words. In vain they sought to restrain that outbreak of rejoicing, in respect to the royal presence ; they had pined, they had yearned for action, and Sir Henry was too good a knight himself not to understand to the full the patriotic fervour and chivalrous spirit from which that shout had sprung. Proudly and joyfully the Bruce looked on his devoted adherents, and then addressed the English knight.

"Thou hast our answer, good Sir Henry," he said ; "more thou couldst scarcely need. Commend us to your master, and take heed thou sayest all that thou hast heard and seen in answer to his challenge. In the Park of Methven, three days hence, he may expect the king of

Scotland and his patriot troops with him, to do battle unto death. Edward, good brother, thou, Seaton, and the Lord of Douglas, conduct this worthy knight in all honour from the hall. Thou hast our answer."

The knight bowed low, but ere he retreated he spoke again. "I am charged yet with another matter, an it so please you," he said, evidently studying to avoid all royal titles, although the bearing of the king rendered his task rather more difficult than he could have imagined; "a matter of small import, truly, yet must it be spoken. 'Tis rumoured that you have amid your household a child, a boy, whose father was a favoured servant of my gracious liege and yours, King Edward. The Earl of Pembroke, in the name of his sovereign and of the child's father, bids me demand him of thee, as having, from his tender years and inexperience, no will or voice in this matter, he having been brought here by his mother, who, saving your presence, had done better to have remembered her duty to her husband than encourage rebellion against her king."

"Keep to the import of thy message, nor give thy tongue such license, sir," interrupted the Bruce, sternly; and many an eye flashed and many a hand sought his sword. "Sir Alan of Buchan, stand forth and give thine own answer to this imperative demand; 'tis to thee, methinks, its import would refer. Thou hast wisdom and experience, if not years enough, to answer for thyself."

"Tell Aymer de Valence, would he seek me, he will find me by the side of my sovereign King Robert, in Methven Park, three days hence," boldly and quickly answered the young soldier, stepping forward from his post in the circle, and fronting the knight. "Tell him I am here of my own free will, to acknowledge Robert the Bruce as mine and Scotland's king; to defy the tyrant Edward, even to the death; tell him 'tis no child he seeks, but a knight and soldier, who will meet him on the field."

"It would seem we are under some mistake, young sir," replied Sir Henry, gazing with unfeigned admiration on the well-knit frame and glowing features of the youthful knight. "I speak of and demand the surrender of the son and heir of John Comyn, Earl of Buchan, who was represented to me as a child of some ten or thirteen summers; 'tis with him, not with thee, my business treats."

“And ’tis the son—I know not how long *heir*—of John Comyn, Earl of Buchan, who speaks with thee, sir knight. It may well be, my very age, my very existence hath been forgotten by my father,” he added, with a fierceness and bitterness little in accordance with his years, “aye, and would have been remembered no more, had not the late events recalled them; yet, ’tis even so—and that thy memory prove not treacherous, there lies my gage. Foully and falsely hast thou spoken of Isabella of Buchan, and her honour is dear to her son as is his own. In Methven Park we *two* shall meet, sir knight, and the child, the puny stripling, who hath of his own nor voice nor will, will not fail thee, be thou sure.”

Proudly, almost sternly, the boy fixed his flashing orbs on the English knight, and without removing his glance, strode to the side of his mother and drew her arm within his own. There was something in the accent, in the saddened yet resolute expression of his countenance, which forbade all rejoinder, not from Sir Henry alone, but even from his own friends. Seymour raised the gage, and with a meaning smile secured it in his helmet; then respectfully saluting the group around him, withdrew, attended as desired by the Bruce.

“Heed it not, my boy, my own noble boy!” said the Countess of Buchan, in those low, earnest, musical tones peculiarly her own; for she saw that there was a quivering in the lip, a sudden paleness in the cheek of her son, as he gazed up in her face, when he thought they stood alone, which denoted internal emotion yet stronger than that which had inspired his previous words. “Their scorn, their contumely, I heed as little as the mountain rock the hailstones which fall upon its sides, in vain seeking to penetrate or wound. Nay, I could smile at them in very truth, were it not that compelled as I am to act alone, to throw aside as worthless and rejected those natural ties I had so joyed to wear, my heart seems closed to smiles; but for words as those, or yet harsher scorn, grieve not, my noble boy, they have no power to fret or hurt me.”

“Yet to hear them speak in such tone of thee—thee, whose high soul and noble courage would shame a score of some who write themselves men!—thee, who with all a woman’s loving heart, and guileless, unselfish, honourable mind, hath all a warrior’s stern resolve, a patriot’s noble

purpose. Mother, mother, how may thy son brook scorn and falsity, and foul calumny cast upon thee?" and there was a choking suffocation in his throat, filling his eyes perforce with tears; and had it not been that manhood struggled for dominion, he would have flung himself upon his mother's breast and wept.

"As a soldier and a man, my son," she drew him closer to her as she spoke; "as one who, knowing and feeling the worth of the contemned one, is conscious that the foul tongues of evil men can do no ill, but fling back the shame upon themselves. Arouse thee, my beloved son. Alas! when I look on thee, on thy bright face, on those graceful limbs, so supple now in health and life, and feel to what my deed may have devoted thee, my child, my child, I need not slanderous tongues to grieve me!"

"And doth the Countess of Buchan regret that deed?" asked the rich sonorous voice of the Bruce, who, unobserved, had heard their converse. "Would she recall that which she hath done?"

"Sire, not so," she answered; "precious as is my child to this lone heart—inexpressibly dear and precious—yet if the liberty of his country demand me to resign him, the call shall be obeyed."

"Speak not thus, noble lady," returned the king, cheerily. "He is but *lent*, Scotland asks no more; and when heaven smiles upon this poor country, smiles in liberty and peace, trust me, such devotedness will not have been in vain. Our youthful knight will lay many a wreath of laurel at his mother's feet, nor will there then be need to guard her name from scorn. See what new zest and spirit have irradiated the brows of our warlike guests; we had scarce deemed more needed than was there before, yet the visit of Sir Henry Seymour, bearing as it did a challenge to strife and blood, hath given fresh lightness to every step, new joyousness to every tone. Is not this as it should be?"

"Aye, as it *must* be, sire, while loyal hearts and patriot spirits form thy court. Nobly and gallantly was the answer given to Pembroke's challenge. Yet pardon me, sire, was it wise, was it well?"

"Its wisdom, lady, rests with its success in the hands of a higher power," answered the king, gravely, yet kindly. "Other than we did we could not do; rashly and pre-

sumptuously we would not have left our quarters. Not for the mere chase of, mad wish for glory would we have risked the precious lives of our few devoted friends, but challenged as we were, the soul of Bruce could not have spoken other than he did ; nor do we repent, nay, we rejoice that the stern day of inaction is over. Thine eye tells me thou canst understand this, lady, therefore we say no more, save to beseech thee to inspire our consort with the necessity of this deed ; she trembles for the issue of our daring. See how grave and sad she looks, so lately as she was all smiles."

The countess did not reply, but hastened to the side of the amiable but yet too womanly Queen Margaret, and gently but invisibly sought to soothe her fears, and she partially succeeded, for the queen ever seemed to feel herself a bolder and firmer character when in the presence and under the influence of Isabella of Buchan.

CHAPTER X.

It was a gallant though, alas ! but too small a force which, richly and bravely accoutred, with banners proudly flying, music sounding, superb chargers caparisoned for war, lances in rest, and spear and bill, sword and battle-axe, marched through the olden gates of Scone in a south-westward direction, early on the morning of the 25th of June, 1306. Many were the admiring eyes and yearning hearts which followed them, and if doubt and dread did mingle in the fervid aspirations raised for their welfare and success, they were not permitted to gain ascendancy so long as the cheering tones and happy smiles of every one of that patriot band lingered on the ear and sight. As yet there were but few of the nobles and knights with their men. The troops had been commanded to march leisurely forward, under charge of the esquires and gentlemen, who were mostly lieutenants or cornets to their leaders' respective bands of followers ; and, if not overtaken before, to halt in a large meadow to the north of Perth, which lay in their way.

The knots of citizens, however, who had accompanied the army to the farthest environs of the town, had not dis-

persed to their several homes ere the quick, noisy clattering of a gallant troop of horse echoed along the street, and the king, surrounded by his highest nobles and bravest knights, galloped by, courteously returning the shouts and acclamations of delight which hailed him on every side. His vizor was purposely left up, and his noble countenance, beaming with animation and hope, seemed to inspire fresh hope and confidence in all that gazed. A white ostrich plume, secured to his helmet by a rich clasp of pearls and diamonds, fell over his left shoulder till it well-nigh mingled with the flowing mane of his charger, whose coal-black glossy hide was almost concealed beneath the armour which enveloped him, and the saddle-cloth of crimson velvet, whose golden fringe nearly swept the ground. King Robert was clothed in the same superb suit of polished steel armour, inlaid and curiously wrought with ingrained silver, in which we saw him at first; a crimson scarf secured his trusty sword to his side, and a short mantle of azure velvet, embroidered with the golden thistle of Scotland, and lined with the richest sable, was secured at his throat by a splendid collaret of gems. The costly materials of his dress, and, yet more, the easy and graceful seat upon his charger, his chivalric bearing, and the frank, noble expression of his countenance, made him, indeed, "look every inch a king," and might well of themselves have inspired and retained the devoted loyalty of his subjects, even had there been less of chivalry in his daring rising.

Edward Bruce was close beside his brother. With a figure and appearance equally martial and equally prepossessing, he wanted the quiet dignity, the self-possession of voice and feature which characterised the king. He had not the mind of Robert, and consequently the uppermost passion of the spirit was ever the one marked on his brow. On this morning he was all animated smiles, for war was alike his vocation and his pastime.

Thomas and Alexander Bruce were also there, both gallant men and well-tried warriors, and eager as Edward for close encounter with the foe. The Earls of Lennox and Athol, although perhaps in their secret souls they felt that the enterprise was rash, gave no evidence of reluctance in their noble bearing; indeed, had they been certain of marching to their death, they would not have turned from

the side of Bruce. The broad banner of Scotland, whose ample folds waved in the morning breeze, had been intrusted to the young heir of Buchan, who with the other young and new-made knights, eager and zealous to win their spurs, had formed a body guard around the banner, swearing to defend it to the last moment of their lives. Nigel Bruce was one of these; he rode close beside his brother in arms, and midst that animated group, those eager spirits throbbing for action, no heart beat quicker than his own. All was animated life, anticipated victory; the very heavens smiled as if they would shed no shadow on this patriot band.

It was scarcely two hours after noon when King Robert and his troops arrived at the post assigned—the park or wood of Methven; and believing that it was not till the succeeding day to which the challenge of Pembroke referred, he commanded his men to make every preparation for a night encampment. The English troops lay at about a quarter of a mile distant, on the side of a hill, which, as well as tree and furze would permit, commanded a view of the Bruce's movements. There were tents erected, horses picketed, and every appearance of quiet, confirming the Scotch in their idea of no engagement taking place till the morrow.

Aware of the great disparity of numbers, King Robert eagerly and anxiously examined his ground as to the best spot for awaiting the attack of the English. He fixed on a level green about half a mile square, guarded on two sides by a thick wood of trees, on the third and left by a deep running rivulet, and open on the fourth, encumbered only by short, thick bushes and little knots of thorn, which the king welcomed, as impeding the progress and obstructing the evolutions of Pembroke's horse. The bushes which were scattered about on the ground he had chosen, he desired his men to clear away, and ere the sun neared his setting, all he wished was accomplished, and his plan of battle arranged. He well remembered the impenetrable phalanx of the unfortunate Wallace at the battle of Falkirk, and determined on exposing a steady front of spears in the same manner. Not having above thirty horse on whom he could depend, and well aware they would be but a handful against Pembroke's two hundred, he placed them in the

rear as a reserve, in the centre of which waved the banner of Scotland. The remainder of his troops he determined on arranging in a compact crescent, the bow exposed to the English, the line stretching out against the wood. This was his intended line of battle, but, either from mistake or purposed treachery on the part of Pembroke, his plan was frustrated, and in addition to the great disparity of numbers, he had to struggle with surprise.

The day had been extremely sultry, and trusting in full confidence to the honour of his opponent, and willing to give his men all needful rest, the king dismissed them from their ranks to refreshment and repose, leaving but very few to guard, himself retiring with his older officers to a tent prepared for his reception.

Arm in arm, and in deep converse, Nigel Bruce and Alan of Buchan wandered a little apart from their companions, preferring a hasty meal and the calm beauty of a lovely summer evening, accompanied by a refreshing breeze, to remaining beside the rude but welcome meal, and sharing the festivity which enlivened it.

"Thinkest thou not, Nigel, his grace trusts but too fully to the honour of these Englishmen?" asked Alan, somewhat abruptly, turning the conversation from the dearer topics of Agnes and her mother, which had before engrossed them.

"On my faith, if he judge of them by his own true noble spirit, he judges them too well."

"Nay, thou art over-suspicious, friend Alan," answered Nigel, smiling. "What fearest thou?"

"I like not the absence of all guards, not so much for the safety of our own camp, but to keep sharp watch on the movements of our friends yonder. Nigel, there is some movement; they look not as they did an hour ago."

"Impossible, quite impossible, Alan; the English knights are too chivalric, too honourable, to advance on us to-night. If they have made a movement, 'tis but to repose."

"Nigel, if Pembroke feels inclined to take advantage of our unguarded situation, he will swear, as many have done before him, that a new day began with the twelve-chime bell of this morning, and be upon us ere we are aware; and I say again, there is movement, and warlike movement, too, in yonder army. Are tents deserted, and horses and men collected, for the simple purpose of retiring

to rest? Come with me to yon mound, and see if I be not correct in my surmise."

Startled by Alan's earnest manner, despite his firm reliance on Pembroke's honour, Nigel made no farther objection, but hastened with him to the eminence he named. It was only too true. Silently and guardedly, the whole English army, extending much farther towards Perth than was visible to the Scotch, had been formed in battle array, line after line stretching forth its glittering files, in too compact and animated array to admit of a doubt as to their intentions. The sun had completely sunk, and dim mists were spreading up higher and higher from the horizon, greatly aiding the treacherous movements of the English.

"By heavens, 'tis but too true!" burst impetuously from Nigel's lips, indignation expressed in every feature. "Base, treacherous cowards! Hie thee to the king—fly for thy life—give him warning, while I endeavour to form the lines. In vain, utterly in vain!" he muttered, as Alan with the speed of lightning darted down the slope. "They are formed—fresh, both man and horse—double, aye, more than treble our numbers; they will be upon us ere the order of battle can be formed, and defeat *now*—"

He would not give utterance to the dispiriting truth which closed that thought, but springing forward, dashed through fern and brake, and halted not till he stood in the centre of his companions, who, scattered in various attitudes on the grass, were giving vent, in snatches of song and joyous laughter, to the glee which filled their souls.

"Up! up!—the foe!" shouted Nigel, in tones so unlike the silvery accents which in general characterised him, that his companions started to their feet and grasped their swords, as roused by the sound of trumpet. "Pembroke is false: to arms—to your posts! Fitz-Alan—Douglas—sound an alarm, and, in heaven's name, aid me in getting the men under arms! Be calm, be steady; display no alarm, no confusion, and all may yet be well."

He was obeyed. The quick roll of the drum, the sharp, quick blast of the trumpet echoed and re-echoed at different sides of the encampment; the call to arms, in various stentorian tones, rung through the woodland glades, quickly banished all other sounds. Every man sprung at once from his posture of repose, and gathered round their respective

leaders ; startled, confused, yet still in order, still animated, still confident, and yet more exasperated against their foe.

The appearance of their sovereign, unchanged in his composed and warlike mien, evincing perhaps yet more animation in his darkly flushing cheek, compressed lip, and sparkling eye ; his voice still calm, though his commands were more than usually hurried ; his appearance on every side, forming, arranging, encouraging, almost at the same instant—at one moment exciting their indignation against the treachery of the foe, at others appealing to their love for their country, their homes, their wives, to their sworn loyalty to himself—inspired courage and confidence at the same instant as he allayed confusion ; but despite every effort both of leader and men, it needed time to form in the compact order which the king had planned, and ere it was accomplished, nearer and nearer came the English, increasing their pace to a run as they approached, and finally charging in full and overwhelming career against the unprepared but gallant Scots. Still there was no wavering amid the Scottish troops ; still they stood their ground, and forming, almost as they fought, in closer and firmer order, exposing the might and unflinching steadiness of desperate men, determined on liberty or death, to the greater number and better discipline of their foe. It mattered not that the fading light of day had given place to the darker shades of night, but dimly illumined by the rising moon, they struggled on, knowing as if by instinct friend from foe. And fearful was it to watch the mighty struggles from figures gleaming as gigantic shadows in the darkness ; now and then came a deep smothered cry or bursting groan, wrung from the throes of death, or the wild, piercing scream from a slaughtered horse, but the tongues of life were silent ; the clang of armour, the clash of steel, the heavy fall of man and horse, indeed came fitfully and fearfully on the night breeze, and even as the blue spectral flash of summer lightning did the bright swords rise and fall in the thick gloom.

“Back, back, dishonoured knight ! back, recreant traitor !” shouted James of Douglas ; and his voice was heard above the roar of battle, and those near him saw him at the same instant spring from his charger, thrust back Pembroke and other knights who were thronging round him, and with unrivalled skill and swiftness aid a tall and well-known form

to rise and spring on the horse he held for him. "Thinkest thou the sacred person of the King of Scotland is for such as thee? back, I say!" And he did force him, armed and on horseback as he was, many paces back, and Robert Bruce again galloped over the field, bareheaded, indeed, for his helmet had fallen off in the strife, urging, inciting, leading on yet again to the charge. And it was in truth as if a super-human strength and presence had been granted the patriot king that night, for there were veteran warriors there, alike English and Scotch, who paused even in the work of strife to gaze and tremble.

Again was he unhorsed; crushed by numbers, one moment more and he had fallen into the hands of his foes, and Scotland had lain a slave for ever at the feet of England; but again was relief at hand, and the young Earl of Mar, dashing his horse between the prostrate monarch and his thronging enemies, laid the foremost, who was his own countryman, dead on the field, and remained fighting alone; his single arm dealing deadly blows on every side at the same moment, until Robert had regained his feet, and, though wounded and well-nigh exhausted, turned in fury to the rescue of his preserver. It was too late; in an agony of spirit no pen can describe, he beheld his faithful and gallant nephew overpowered by numbers, and led off a captive, and he stood by, fighting indeed like a lion, dealing death wherever his sword fell, but utterly unable to rescue or defend him. Again his men thronged round him, their rallying point, their inspiring hope, their guardian spirit; again he was on horseback, and still, still that fearful strife continued. Aided by the darkness, the Bruce in his secret soul yet encouraged one gleam of hope, yet dreamed of partial success, at least of avoiding that almost worse than death—a total and irremediable defeat. Alas! had the daylight suddenly illumined that scene, he would have felt, have seen that hope was void.

Gallantly meanwhile, gallantly even as a warrior of a hundred fields, had the young heir of Buchan redeemed his pledge to his sovereign, and devoted sword and exposed life in his cause. The standard of Scotland had never touched the ground. Planting it firmly in the earth, he had for awhile defended it nobly where he stood, curbing alike the high spirit of his prancing horse and his own intense longing

to dash forward in the thickest of the fight. He saw his companions fall one by one, till he was well-nigh left alone. He heard confused cries, as of triumph; he beheld above twenty Englishmen dashing towards him, and he felt a few brief minutes and his precious charge might be waved in scorn as a trophy by the victors; the tide of battle had left him for an instant comparatively alone, and in that instant his plan was formed.

"Strike hard, and fear not!" he cried to an old retainer, who stirred not from his side; "divide this heavy staff, and I will yet protect my charge, and thou and I, Donald, will to King Robert's side; he needs all true men about him now."

Even as he spoke his command was understood and obeyed. One sweep of the stout highlander's battle-axe severed full four feet of the heavy lance to which the standard was attached, and enabled Alan without any inconvenience to grasp in his left hand the remainder, from which the folds still waved; grasping his sword firmly in his right, and giving his horse the rein, shouting, "Comyn, to the rescue!" he darted towards the side where the strife waxed hottest.

It was a cry which alike startled friends and foes, for that name was known to one party as so connected with devoted adherence to Edward, to the other so synonymous with treachery, that united as it was with "to the rescue," some there were who paused to see whence and from whom it came. The banner of Scotland quickly banished doubt as to which party that youthful warrior belonged, knights and yeomen alike threw themselves in his path to obtain possession of so dear a prize. Followed by about ten stalwart men of his clan, the young knight gallantly cut his way through the greater number of his opponents, but a sudden gleam on the helmet of one of them caused him to halt suddenly.

"Ha! Sir Henry Seymour, we have met at length!" he shouted. "Thou bearest yet my gage, 'tis well. I am here to redeem it."

"Give up that banner to a follower then," returned Sir Henry, courteously, checking his horse in its full career, "for otherwise we meet at odds. Thou canst not redeem thy gage, and defend thy charge at the same moment."

"Give up my charge! Never, so help me heaven! friend or foe shall claim it but with my life," returned Alan, proudly. "Come on, sir knight; I am here to defend the honour thou hast injured, the honour of one dearer than my own."

"Have then thy will, proud boy, thy blood be on thine own head," replied Seymour; but ere he spurred on to the charge, he called aloud, "let none come between us, none dare to interfere—'tis a quarrel touching none save ourselves," and Alan bowed his head, in courteous recognition of the strict observance of the rules of chivalry in his adversary, at the very moment that he closed with him in deadly strife; and such was war in the age of chivalry, and so strict were its rules, that even with the standard of Scotland in his hand, the person of the heir of Buchan was sacred to all save to his particular opponent.

It was a brief yet determined struggle. Their swords crossed and recrossed with such force and rapidity, that sparks of fire flashed from the blades; the aim of both appeared rather to unhorse and disarm than slay. Seymour, perhaps from admiration of the boy's extraordinary bravery and daring, and Alan from a feeling of respect for the true chivalry of the English knight. The rush of battle for a minute unavoidably separated them. About four feet of the banner staff yet remained uninjured, both in its stout wood and sharp iron head; with unparalleled swiftness, Alan partly furled the banner round the pike, and transferred it to his right hand, then grasping it firmly, and aiming full at Sir Henry's helm, backed his horse several paces to allow of a wider field, gave his steed the spur, and dashed forward quick as the wind. The manœuvre succeeded. Completely unprepared for this change alike in weapon and attack, still dazzled and slightly confused by the rush which had divided them, Sir Henry scarcely saw the youthful knight, till he felt his helmet transfixd by the lance, and the blow guided so well and true, that irresistibly it bore him from his horse, and he lay stunned and helpless, but not otherwise hurt, at the mercy of his foe. Recovering his weapon, Alan, aware that the great disparity of numbers rendered the securing English prisoners but a mere waste of time, contented himself by waving the

standard high in air, and again shouting his war-cry, galloped impetuously on. Wounded he was, but he knew it not; the excitement, the inspiration of the moment was all he felt.

"To the king—to the king!" shouted Nigel Bruce, urging his horse to the side of Alan, and ably aiding him to strike down their rapidly increasing foes. "Hemmed in on all sides, he will fall beneath their thirsting swords. To the king—to the king! Yield he never will; and better he should not. On, on, for the love of life, of liberty, of Scotland!—on to the king!"

His impassioned words reached even hearts fainting 'neath exhaustion, failing in hope, for they knew they strove in vain; yet did that tone, those words rouse even them, and their flagging limbs grew strong for Robert's sake, and some yet reached the spot to fight and die around him; others—alas! the greater number—fell ere the envied goal was gained.

The sight of the royal standard drew, as Alan had hoped, the attention of some from the king, and gave him a few moments to rally. Again there was a moment of diversion in favour of the Scotch. The brothers of the Bruce and some others of his bravest knights were yet around him, seemingly uninjured, and each and all appeared endowed with the strength of two. The gigantic form of Edward Bruce, the whelming sweep of his enormous battle-axe, had cleared a partial space around the king, but still the foes hemmed in, reinforced even as they fell. About this time the moon, riding high in the heavens, had banished the mists which had enveloped her rising, and flung down a clear, silvery radiance over the whole field, disclosing for the first time to King Robert the exact situation in which he stood. Any farther struggle, and defeat, imprisonment, death, all stared him in the face, and Scotland's liberty was lost, and for ever. The agony of this conviction was known to none save to the sovereign's own heart, and to that Searcher of all, by whom its every throb was felt.

The wood behind him was still plunged in deep shadows, and he knew the Grampian hills, with all their inaccessible paths and mountain fastnesses—known only to the true children of Scotland—could easily be reached, were the pursuit of the English eluded, which he believed could be

easily accomplished, were they once enabled to retreat into the wood.

The consummate skill and prudence of the Bruce characterising him as a general, even as his extraordinary daring and exhaustless courage marked the warrior, enabled him to effect this precarious and delicate movement, in the very sight of and almost surrounded by foes. Covering his troops, or rather the scattered remnant of troops, by exposing his own person to the enemy, the king was still the first object of attack, the desire of securing his person, or, at least, obtaining possession of his head, becoming more and more intense. But it seemed as though a protecting angel hovered round him : for he had been seen in every part of the field ; wherever the struggle had been fiercest, he had been the centre ; twice he had been unhorsed, and bareheaded almost from the commencement of the strife, yet there he was still, seemingly as firm in his saddle, as strong in frame, as unscathed in limb, as determined in purpose, as when he sent back his acceptance of Pembroke's challenge. Douglas, Fitz-Alan, Alexander and Nigel Bruce, and Alan of Buchan, still bearing the standard, were close around the king, and it was in this time of precaution, of less inspiring service, that the young Alan became conscious that he was either severely wounded, or that the strength he had taxed far beyond its natural powers was beginning to fail. Still mechanically he grasped the precious banner, and still he crossed his sword with every foe that came ; but the quick eye of Nigel discerned there was a flagging of strength, and he kept close beside him to aid and defend. The desired goal was just attained, the foes were decreasing in numbers, for they were scattered some distance from each other, determined on scouring the woods in search of fugitives, the horses of the king and his immediate followers were urged to quicken their pace, when an iron-headed quarel, discharged from an arbalist, struck the royal charger, which, with a shrill cry of death, dropped instantly, and again was the king unhorsed. The delay occasioned in extricating him from the fallen animal was dangerous in the extreme ; the greater part of his men were at some distance, for the king had ordered them, as soon as the unfrequented hollows of the wood were reached, to disperse, the better to elude their pursuers.

Douglas, Alexander Bruce, and Fitz-Alan had galloped on, unconscious of the accident, and Nigel and Alan were alone near him. A minute sufficed for the latter to spring from his horse and aid the king to mount, and both entreated, conjured him to follow their companions, and leave them to cover his retreat. Awhile he refused, declaring he would abide with them, he would not so cowardly desert them.

"Leave you to death!" he cried, "my friends, my children; no, no! Urge me no more. If I may not save my country, I may *die* for her."

"Thou shalt not, so help me, heaven!" answered Nigel, impetuously. "King, friend, brother, there is yet time. Hence, I do beseech thee, hence. Nay, an thou wilt not, I will e'en forget thou art my king, and force thee from this spot."

He snatched the reins of his brother's horse, and urging it with his own to their fullest speed, took the most unfrequented path, and dashing over every obstacle, through brake and briar, and over hedge and ditch, placed him in comparative safety.

And was Alan deserted? did his brother in arms, in his anxiety to save the precious person of his royal brother, forget the tie that bound them, and leave him to die alone? A sickening sense of inability, of utter exhaustion crept over the boy's sinking frame, inability even to drag his limbs towards the wood and conceal himself from his foes. Mechanically he at first stood grasping the now-tattered colours, as if his hand were nailed unto the staff, his foot rooted to the ground. There were many mingled cries, sending their shrill echoes on the night breeze; there were chargers scouring the plain; bodies of men passing and re-passing within twenty yards of the spot where he stood, yet half hidden by the deep shadow of a large tree, for some minutes he was unobserved. An armed knight, with about twenty followers, were rushing by; they stopped, they recognised the banner; they saw the bowed and drooping figure who supported it, they dashed towards him. With a strong effort Alan roused himself from that lethargy of faintness. Nearer and nearer they came.

"Yield, or you die!" were the words borne to his ear, shrill, loud, fraught with death, and his spirit sprang up with the sound. He waved his sword above his head, and

threw himself into a posture of defence ; but ere they reached him, there was a sudden and rapid tramp of horse, and the voice of Nigel Bruce shouted—

“Mount, mount ! God in heaven be thanked, I am here in time !”

Alan sprung into the saddle ; he thought not to inquire how that charger had been found, nor knew he till some weeks after that Nigel had exposed his own person to imminent danger, to secure one of the many steeds flying masterless over the plain. On, on they went, and frequently the head of Alan drooped from very faintness to his saddle-bow, and Nigel feared to see him fall exhausted to the earth, but still they pursued their headlong way. Death was behind them, and the lives of all true and loyal Scotsmen were too precious to admit a pause.

The sun had risen when King Robert gazed round him on the remnant of his troops. It was a wild brake, amid surrounding rocks and mountains where they stood ; a torrent threw itself headlong from a craggy steep, and made its way to the glen, tumbling and roaring and dashing over the black stones that opposed its way. The dark pine, the stunted fir, the weeping birch, and many another mountain tree, marked the natural fertility of the soil, although its aspect seemed wild and rude. It was to this spot the king had desired the fugitives to direct their several ways, and now he gazed upon all, all that were spared to him and Scotland from that disastrous night. In scattered groups they stood or sate ; their swords fallen from their hands, their heads drooping on their breasts, with the mien of men whose last hope had been cast on a single die, and wrecked for ever. And when King Robert thought of the faithful men who, when the sun had set the previous evening, had gathered round him in such devoted patriotism, such faithful love, and now beheld the few there were to meet his glance, to give him the sympathy, the hope he needed, scarcely could he summon energy sufficient to speak against hope, to rally the failing spirits of his remaining followers. Mar, Athol, Hay, Fraser, he knew were prisoners, and he knew, too, that in their cases that word was but synonymous with death. Lennox, his chosen friend, individually the dearest of all his followers, he too was not there, though none remembered his being taken ; Randolph,

his nephew, and about half of those gallant youths who not ten days previous had received and welcomed the honour of knighthood, in all the high hopes and buoyancy of youth and healthful life ; more, many more than half the number of the stout yeomen, who had risen at his call to rescue their land from chains—where now were these ? Was it wonder that the king had sunk upon a stone, and bent his head upon his hands ? But speedily he rallied ; he addressed each man by name ; he spoke comfort, hope, not lessening the magnitude of his defeat, but still promising them liberty—still promising that yet would their homes be redeemed, their country free ; aye, even were he compelled to wander months, nay, years in those mountain paths, with nought about him but the title of a king ; still, while he had life, would he struggle on for Scotland ; still did he feel, despite of blighted hope, of bitter disappointment, that to him was intrusted the sacred task of her deliverance. Would he, might he sink and relax in his efforts and resign his purpose, because the first engagement was attended by defeat ? had he done so, it was easy to have found death on the field. Had he listened to the voice of despair, he confessed, he would not have left that field alive.

“ But I lived for my country, for, ye, her children,” he continued, his voice becoming impassioned in its fervour ; “ lived to redeem this night, to suffer on awhile, to be your saviour still. Will ye then desert me ? will ye despond, because of one defeat—yield to despair, when Scotland yet calls aloud ? No, no, it cannot be !” and roused by his earnest, his eloquent appeal, that devoted band sprung from their drooping posture, and kneeling at his feet, renewed their oaths of allegiance to him ; the oath that bound them to seek liberty for Scotland. It was then, as one by one advanced, the king for the first time missed his brother Nigel and the heir of Buchan ; amidst the overwhelming bitterness of thought which had engrossed him, he had for a brief while forgotten the precarious situation of Alan, and the determination of Nigel to seek and save, or die with him ; but now the recollection of both rushed upon him, and the flush which his eloquence had summoned faded at once, and the sudden expression of anguish passing over his features roused the attention of all who stood near him.

"They must have fallen," he murmured, and for the first time, in a changed and hollow voice, "My brother, my brother, dearest, best! can it be that, in thy young beauty, thou, too, art taken from me?—and Alan, how can I tell his mother—how face her sorrow for her son?"

Time passed, and there was no sound; the visible anxiety of the king hushed into yet deeper stillness the voices hushed before. His meaning was speedily gathered from his broken words, and many mounted the craggy heights to mark if there might not be yet some signs of the missing ones. Time seemed to linger on his flight. The intervening rocks and bushes confined all sounds within a very narrow space; but at length a faint unintelligible noise broke on the stillness; it came nearer, nearer still, a moment more and the tread of horses' hoofs echoed amongst the rocks—a shout, a joyful shout proclaimed them friends. The king sprung to his feet. Another minute Nigel and Alan pressed around him; with the banner still in his hand, Alan knelt and laid it at his sovereign's feet.

"From thy hand I received it, to thee I restore it," he said, but his voice was scarcely articulate; he bowed his head to press Robert's extended hand to his lips, and sunk senseless at his feet.

CHAPTER XI.

RUMOURS of the fatal issue of the engagement at Methven speedily reached Scone, laden, of course, with yet more disastrous tidings than had foundation in reality. King Robert, it was said, and all his nobles and knights—nay, his whole army—were cut off to a man; the king, if not taken prisoner, was left dead on the field, and all Scotland lay again crushed and enslaved at the feet of Edward. For four and twenty hours did the fair inhabitants of the palace labour under this belief, well-nigh stunned beneath the accumulation of misfortune. It was curious to remark the different forms in which affliction appeared in different characters. The queen, in loud sobs and repeated wailing, at one time deplored her own misery; at others, accused her husband of rashness and madness. Why had he not taken her ad-

vice and remained quiet? Why could he not have been contented with the favour of Edward and a proud, fair heritage? What good did he hope to get for himself by assuming the crown of so rude and barren a land as Scotland? Had she not told him he was but a summer king, that the winter would soon blight his prospects and nip his budding hopes; and had she not proved herself wiser even than he was himself? and then she would suddenly break off in these reproaches to declare that, if he were a prisoner, she would go to him; she would remain with him to the last; she would prove how much she idolized him—her own, her brave, her noble Robert. And vain was every effort on the part of her sister-in-law and the Countess of Buchan, and other of her friends, to mitigate these successive bursts of sorrow. The Lady Seaton, of a stronger mind, yet struggled with despondency, yet strove to hope, to believe all was not as overwhelming as had been described; although, if rumour were indeed true, she had lost a husband and a son, the gallant young Earl of Mar, whom she had trained to all noble deeds and honourable thoughts, for he had been fatherless from infancy. Lady Mary could forget her own deep anxieties, her own fearful forebodings, silently and unobservedly to watch, to follow, to tend the Countess of Buchan, whose marble cheek and lip, and somewhat sterner expression of countenance than usual, alone betrayed the anxiety passing within, for words it found not. She could share with her the task of soothing, of cheering Agnes, whose young spirit lay crushed beneath this heavy blow. She did not complain, she did not murmur, but evidently struggled to emulate her mother's calmness, for she would bend over her frame and endeavour to continue her embroidery. But those who watched her, marked her frequent shudder, the convulsive sob, the tiny hands pressed closely together, and then upon her eyes, as if to still their smarting throbs; and Isoline, who sat in silence on a cushion at her feet, could catch such low whispered words as these—

"Nigel, Nigel, could I but know thy fate! Dead, dead!—could I not die with thee? Imprisoned, have I not a right to follow thee; to tend, to soothe thee? Anything, oh, anything, but this horrible suspense! Alan, my brother, thou too, so young, to die."

The morning of the second day brought other and less dis-

tressing rumours : all had not fallen, all were not taken. There were tales of courage, of daring gallantry, of mighty struggles almost past belief ; but what were they, even in that era of chivalry, to the heart sinking under apprehensions, the hopes just springing up amidst the wild chaos of thoughts to smile a moment, to be crushed 'neath suspense, uncertainty, the next ?—Still the eager tones of conjecture, the faintest-spoken whispers of renewed hope, were better than the dead stillness, the heavy hush of despair.

And the queen's apartments, in which at sunset all her friends had assembled, presented less decided sounds of mourning and of wail, than the previous day. Margaret was indeed still one minute plunged in tears and sobs, and the next hoping more, believing more than any one around her. Agnes had tacitly accompanied her mother and Lady Mary to the royal boudoir, but she had turned in very sickness of heart from all her companions, and remained standing in a deep recess formed by the high and narrow casement, alone, save Isoline, who still clung to her side, pale, motionless as the marble statue near her, whose unconscious repose she envied.

"Speak, Isabella, why will you not speak to me?" said the queen, fretfully. "My husband bade me look to thee for strength, for support under care and affliction like to this, yet thou keepest aloof from me ; thou hast words of comfort, of cheering for all save me."

"Not so, royal lady, not so," she answered, as with a faint, scarcely perceptible smile, she advanced to the side of her royal mistress, and took her hand in hers. "I have spoken, I have urged, entreated, conjured thee to droop not ; for thy husband's sake, to hope on, despite the terrible rumours abroad. I have besought thee to seek firmness for his sake ; but thou didst but tell me, Isabella, Isabella, thou canst not feel as I do, he is nought to thee but thy king ; to me, what is he not ? king, hero, husband—all, my only all ; and I have desisted, lady, for I deemed my words offended, my counsel unadvised, and looked on but as cold and foolish."

"Nay, did I say all this to thee ? Isabella, forgive me, for indeed, indeed, I knew it not," replied Margaret, her previous fretfulness subsiding into a softened and less painful burst of weeping. "He is in truth, my all, my heart's

dearest, best, and without him, oh! what am I? even a cipher, a reed, useless to myself, to my child, as to all others. I am not like thee, Isabella—would, would I were; I should be more worthy of my Robert's love, and consequently dearer to his heart. I can be but a burden to him now."

"Hush, hush! would he not chide thee for such words, my Margaret?" returned the countess, soothingly, and in a much lower voice, speaking as she would to a younger sister. "Had he not deemed thee worthy, would he have made thee his? oh, no, believe it not; he is too true, too honourable for such thought."

"He loved me, because he saw that I loved," whispered the queen, perceiving that her companions had left her well-nigh alone with the countess, and following, as was her custom, every impulse of her fond but ill-regulated heart. "I had not even strength to conceal that—that truth which any other would have died rather than reveal. He saw it, and his noble spirit was touched; and he had been all, all, aye, more than I could have dreamed, to me—so loving and so true."

"Then why fancy thyself a burden, not a joy to him, sweet friend?" demanded Isabella of Buchan, the rich accents of her voice even softer and sweeter than usual, for there was something in the clinging confidence of the queen it was impossible not to love.

"I did not, I could not, for he cherished me so fondly till this sudden rising—this time, when the desperate enterprise demands energy and firmness, even from the humblest female, how much more from the Bruce's wife; and his manner is not changed towards me, nor his love. I know he loves me, cherishes me, as he ever did; but he must pity my weakness, my want of nerve; when he compares me to himself, he must look on me with almost contempt. For now it is, now that clearer than ever his character stands forth in such glorious majesty, such moderation, such a daring yet self-governed spirit, that I feel how utterly unworthy I am of him, how little capable to give that spirit, that mind the reflection it must demand; and when my weak fears prevail, my weak fancies speak only of danger and defeat, how can he bear with me? Must I not become, if I am not now, a burden?"

"No, dearest Margaret," replied the countess, instantly.

"The mind that can so well *appreciate* the virtues of her husband will never permit herself, through weakness and want of nerve, to become a burden to him. Thou hast but to struggle with these imaginary terrors, to endeavour to encourage instead of to dispirit, and he will love and cherish thee even more than hadst thou never been unnerved."

"Let him but be restored to me, and I will do all this, I will make myself more worthy of his love; but, oh, Isabella, while I speak this, perhaps he is lost to me for ever; I may never see his face, never hear that tone of love again!" and a fresh flood of weeping concluded her words.

"Nay, but thou wilt—I know thou wilt," answered the countess cheerfully. "Trust me, sweet friend, though defeat may attend him awhile, though he may pass through trial and suffering ere the goal be gained, Robert Bruce will eventually deliver his country—will be her king, her saviour—will raise her in the scale of nations, to a level even with the highest, noblest, most deserving. He is not lost to thee; trial will but prove his worth unto his countrymen, even more than would success."

"And how knowest thou these things, my Isabella?" demanded Margeret, looking up in her face, with a half-playful, half-sorrowful smile. "Hast thou the gift of prophecy?"

"Prophecy!" repeated the countess, sadly. "Alas! 'tis but the character of Robert which hath inspired my brighter vision. Had I the gift of prophecy, my fond heart would not start and quiver thus, when it vainly strives to know the fate of my only son. I, too, have anxiety, lady, though it find not words."

"Thou hast, thou hast, indeed; and yet I, weak, selfish as I am, think only of myself. Stay by me, Isabella; oh, do not leave me, I am stronger by thy side."

It was growing darker and darker, and the hopes that, ere night fell, new and more trustworthy intelligence of the movements of the fugitives would be received were becoming fainter and fainter on every heart. Voices were hushed to silence, or spoke only in whispers. Half an hour passed thus, when the listless suffering on the lovely face of Agnes was observed by Isoline to change to an expression of intense attention.

"Hearest thou no step?" she said, in a low piercing

whisper, and laying a cold and trembling hand on Isoline's arm. "It is, it is his—it is Nigel's; he has not fallen—he is spared!" and she started up, a bright flush on her cheek, her hands pressed convulsively on her heart.

"Nay, Agnes, there is no sound, 'tis but a fancy," but even while she spoke, a rapid step was heard along the corridor, and a shadow darkened the doorway—but was that Nigel? There was no plume, no proud crest on his helmet; his vizor was still closely barred, and a surcoat of coarse black stuff was thrown over his armour, without any decoration to display or betray the rank of the wearer. A faint cry of alarm broke from the queen and many of her friends, but with one bound Agnes sprang to the intruder, whose arms were open to receive her, and wildly uttering "Nigel!" fainted on his bosom.

"And didst thou know me even thus, beloved?" he murmured, rapidly unclasping his helmet and dashing it from him, to imprint repeated kisses on her cheek. "Wake, Agnes, best beloved, mine own sweet love; what hadst thou heard that thou art thus? Oh, wake, smile, speak to me: 'tis thine own Nigel calls."

And vainly, till that face smiled again on him in consciousness, would the anxious inmates of that room have sought and received intelligence, had he not been followed by Lord Douglas, Fitz-Alan, and others, their armour and rank concealed as was Nigel's, who gave the required information as eagerly as it was desired.

"Robert—my king, my husband—where is he—why is he not here?" reiterated Margaret, vainly seeking to distinguish his figure amid the others, obscured as they were by the rapidly-increasing darkness. "Why is he not with ye—why is he not here?"

"And he is here, Meg; here to chide thy love as less penetrating, less able to read disguise or concealment than our gentle Agnes there. Nay, weep not, dearest; my hopes are as strong, my purpose as unchanged, my trust in heaven as fervent as it was when I went forth to battle. Trial and suffering must be mine awhile, I have called it on my own head; but still, oh, still thy Robert shall deliver Scotland—shall cast aside her chains."

The deep, manly voice of the king acted like magic on the depressed spirits of those around him; and though

there was grief, bitter, bitter grief to tell, though many a heart's last lingering hopes were crushed 'neath that fell certainty, which they thought to have pictured during the hours of suspense, and deemed themselves strengthened to endure, yet still 'twas a grief that found vent in tears—grief that admitted of soothing, of sympathy—grief time might heal, not the harrowing agony of grief half told—hopes rising to be crushed.

Still did the Countess of Buchan cling to the massive arm of the chair which Margaret had left, utterly powerless, wholly incapacitated from asking the question on which her very life seemed to depend. Not even the insensibility of her Agnes had had the power to rouse her from the stupor of anxiety which had spread over her, sharpening every faculty and feeling indeed, but rooting her to the spot. Her boy, her Alan, he was not amongst those warriors; she heard not the beloved accents of his voice; she saw not his boyish form—darkness could not deceive her. Disguise would not prevent him, were he amongst his companions, from seeking her embrace. One word would end that anguish, would speak the worst, end it—had he fallen!

The king looked round the group, anxiously and inquiringly.

"The Countess of Buchan?" he said, "where is our noble friend? she surely hath a voice to welcome her king, even though he returned to her defeated."

"Sire, I am here," she said, but with difficulty: and Robert, as if he understood, could read all she was enduring, hastened towards her, and took both her cold hands in his.

"I give thee joy," he said, in accents that reassured her on the instant. "Nobly, gallantly, hath thy patriot boy proved himself thy son; well and faithfully hath he won his spurs, and raised the honour of his mother's olden line. He bade me greet thee with all loving duty, and say he did but regret his wounds that they prevented his attending me, and throwing himself at his mother's feet."

"He is wounded, then, my liege?" Robert felt her hands tremble in his hold.

"It were cruel to deceive thee, lady—desperately, but not dangerously wounded. On the honour of a true knight, there is nought to alarm, though something, perchance, to

regret; for he pines and grieves that it may be yet awhile ere he recover sufficient strength to don his armour. It is not loss of blood, but far more exhaustion from the superhuman exertions that he made. Edward and Alexander are with him; the one a faithful guard, in himself a host, the other no unskilful leech: trust me, noble lady, there is nought to fear."

He spoke, evidently to give her time to recover the sudden revulsion of feeling which his penetrating eye discovered had nearly overpowered her, and he succeeded; ere he ceased, that quivering of frame and lip had passed, and Isabella of Buchan again stood calm and firm, enabled to inquire all particulars of her child, and then join in the council held as to the best plan to be adopted with regard to the safety of the queen and her companions.

In Scone it was evident they could not remain, for already the towns and villages around, which had all declared for the Bruce, were hurrying in the greatest terror to humble themselves before Pembroke, and entreat his interference in their favour with his sovereign. There was little hope, even if Scone remained faithful to his interests, that she would be enabled to defend herself from the attacks of the English; and it would be equally certain that if the wife of Bruce, and the wives and daughters of so many of his loyal followers remained within her walls, to obtain possession of their persons would become Pembroke's first object. It remained to decide whether they should accompany their sovereign to his mountain fastnesses, and expose themselves to all the privations and hardships which would inevitably attend a wandering life, or that they should depart under a safe escort to Norway, whose monarch was friendly to the interests of Scotland. This latter scheme the king very strongly advised, representing in vivid colours the misery they might have to endure if they adhered to him; the continual danger of their falling into the hands of Edward, and even could they elude this, how was it possible their delicate frames, accustomed as they were to luxury and repose, could sustain the rude fare, the roofless homes, the continued wandering amid the crags and floods and deserts of the mountains. He spoke eloquently and feelingly, and there was a brief silence when he concluded. Margaret had thrown her arms round her husband, and

buried her face on his bosom ; her child clung to her father's knee, and laid her soft cheek caressingly by his. Isabella of Buchan, standing a little aloof, remained silent indeed, but no one who gazed on her could doubt her determination or believe she wavered. Agnes was standing in the same recess she had formerly occupied, but how different was the expression of her features. The arm of Nigel was twined round her, his head bent down to hers in deep and earnest commune ; he was pleading against his own will and feelings it seemed, and though he strove to answer every argument, to persuade her it was far better she should seek safety in a foreign land, her determination more firmly expressed than could have been supposed from her yielding disposition, to abide with him, in weal or in woe, to share his wanderings, his home, be it roofless on the mountain, or within palace walls ; that she was a Highland girl, accustomed to mountain paths and woody glens, nerved to hardship and toil—this determination, we say, contrary as it was to his eloquent pleadings, certainly afforded Nigel no pain, and might his beaming features be taken as reply, it was fraught with unmingled pleasure. In a much shorter time than we have taken to describe this, however, the queen had raised her head, and looking up in her husband's face with an expression of devotedness, which gave her countenance a charm it had never had before, fervently exclaimed—

“Robert, come woe or weal, I will abide with thee ; her husband's side is the best protection for a wife ; and if wandering and suffering be his portion, who will soothe and cheer as the wife of his love ? My spirit is but cowardly, my will but weak ; but by thee I may gain the strength which in foreign lands could never be my own. Imaginary terrors, fancied horrors would be worse, oh, how much worse than reality, and when we met again I should be still less worthy of thy love. No, Robert, no ! urge me not, plead to me no more. My friends may do as they will, but Margaret abides with thee.”

“And who is there will pause, will hesitate, when their queen hath spoken thus ?” continued the Countess of Buchan, in a tone that to Margaret's ear whispered approval and encouragement. “Surely, there is none here whose love for their country is so weak, their loyalty to their sovereign

of such little worth, that at the first defeat, the first disappointment, they would fly over seas for safety, and contentedly leave the graves of their fathers, the hearths of their ancestors, the homes of their childhood to be desecrated by the chains of a foreign tyrant, by the footsteps of his hirelings? Oh, do not let us waver. Let us prove that though the arm of woman is weaker than that of man, her spirit is as firm, her heart as true; and that privation, and suffering, and hardship encountered amid the mountains of our land, the natural fastnesses of Scotland, in company with our rightful king, our husbands, our children—all, all aye, death itself, were preferable to exile and separation. 'Tis woman's part to gild, to bless, and make a home, and still, still we may do this, though our ancestral homes be in the hands of Edward. Scotland has still her sheltering breast for all her children; and shall we desert her now?"

"No, no, no!" echoed from every side, enthusiasm kindling with her words. "Better privation and danger in Scotland, than safety and comfort elsewhere."

Nor was this the mere decision of the moment, founded on its enthusiasm. The next morning found them equally firm, equally determined; even the weak and timid Margaret rose in that hour of trial superior to herself, and preparations were rapidly made for their departure. Nor were the prelates of Scotland, who had remained at Scone during the king's engagement, backward in encouraging and blessing their decision. His duties prevented the Abbot of Scone accompanying them; but it was with deep regret he remained behind, not from any fear of the English, for a warrior spirit lurked beneath those episcopal robes, but from his deep reverence for the enterprise, and love for the person of King Robert. He acceded to the necessity of remaining in his abbey with the better grace, as he fondly hoped to preserve the citizens in the good faith and loyalty they had so nobly demonstrated. The Archbishop of St. Andrew's and the Bishop of Glasgow determined on following their sovereign to the death; and the spirit of Robert, wounded as it had been, felt healed and soothed, and inspired afresh, as the consciousness of his power over some true and faithful hearts, of every grade and rank of either sex, became yet more strongly proved in this hour of depres-

sion. He ceased to speak of seeking refuge for his fair companions in another land, their determination to abide with him, and their husbands and sons, was too heartfelt, too unwavering, to allow of a hope to change it; and he well knew that their presence, instead of increasing the cares and anxieties of his followers, would rather lessen them, by shedding a spirit of chivalry even over the weary wanderings he knew must be their portion for a while, by gilding with the light of happier days the hours of darkness that might surround them.

CHAPTER XII.

THE queen and her companions were conveyed in detachments from the palace and town of Scone, the Bruce believing, with justice, they would thus attract less notice, and be better able to reach the mountain in safety. The Countess of Buchan, her friend Lady Mary, Agnes, and Isoline, attended by Sir Nigel, were the first to depart, for though she spoke it not, deep anxiety was on the mother's heart, for the fate of her boy. They mostly left Scone at different hours of the night; and the second day from the king's arrival, the palace was untenanted, all signs of the gallant court, which for a brief space had shed such lustre, such rays of hope on the old town, were gone, and sorrowfully and dispiritedly the burghers and citizens went about their several occupations, for their hearts yet throbbed in loyalty and patriotism, though hope they deemed was wholly at an end. Still they burned with indignation at every intelligence of new desertions to Edward, and though the power of Pembroke compelled them to bend unwillingly to the yoke, it was as a bow too tightly strung, which would snap rather than use its strength in the cause of Edward.

A few weeks' good nursing from his mother and sister, attended as it was by the kindness and warm friendship of the sovereign he adored, and the constant care of Nigel, speedily restored the heir of Buchan, if not entirely to his usual strength, at least with sufficient to enable him to accompany the royal wanderers wherever they pitched their tent, and by degrees join in the adventurous excursions of his

young companions to supply them with provender, for on success in hunting entirely depended their subsistence.

It was in itself a strange romance the life they led. Frequently the blue sky was their only covering, the purple heath their only bed; nor would the king fare better than his followers. Eagerly, indeed, the young men ever exerted themselves to form tents or booths of brushwood, branches of trees, curiously and tastefully interwoven with the wild flowers that so luxuriantly adorned the rocks, for the accommodation of the faithful companions who preferred this precarious existence with them, to comfort, safety, and luxury in a foreign land. Nature, indeed, lavishly supplied them with beautiful materials, and where the will was good, exertion proved but a new enjoyment. Couches and cushions of the softest moss formed alike seats and places of repose; by degrees almost a village of these primitive dwellings would start into being, in the centre of some wild rocks, which formed natural barriers around them, watered, perhaps, by some pleasant brook rippling and gushing by in wild yet soothing music, gemmed by its varied flowers.

Here would be the rendezvous for some few weeks; here would Margaret and her companions rest awhile from their fatiguing wanderings; and could they have thought but of the *present*, they would have been completely happy. Here would their faithful knights return laden with the spoils of the chase, or with some gay tale of danger dared, encountered, and conquered; here would the song send its full tone amid the responding echoes. The harp and muse of Nigel gave a refinement and delicacy to these meetings, marking them indeed the days of chivalry and poetry. Even Edward Bruce, the stern, harsh, dark, passionate warrior, even he felt the magic of the hour, and now that the courage of Nigel had been proved, gave willing ear, and would be among the first to bid him wake his harp, and soothe the troubled visions of the hour; and Robert, who saw so much of his own soul reflected in his young brother, mingled as it was with yet more impassioned fervour, more beautiful, more endearing qualities, for Nigel had needed not trial to purify his soul, and mark him out a patriot, Robert, in very truth, loved him, and often would share with him his midnight couch, his nightly watchings, that he might confide to

that young heart the despondency, the hopelessness, that to none other might be spoken, none other might suspect—the secret fear that his crime would be visited on his unhappy country, and he forbidden to secure her freedom even by the sacrifice of his life.

“If it be so, it must be so ; then be thou her saviour, her deliverer, my Nigel,” he would often urge ; “droop not because I may have departed ; struggle on, do as thy soul prompts, and success will, nay, must attend thee, for thou art pure and spotless, and well deserving of all the glory, the blessedness that will attend the sovereign of our country freed from chains ; thou art in truth deserving of all this, but I—”

“Peace, peace, my brother !” would be Nigel’s answer ; “thou, only thou shalt deliver our country, shall be her free, her patriot king ! Have we not often marked the glorious sun struggling with the black masses of clouds which surround and obscure his rising, struggling, and in vain, to penetrate their murky folds, and deluge the world with light, shining a brief moment, and then immersed in darkness, until, as he nears the western horizon, the heaviest clouds flee before him, the spotless azure spreadeth its beautiful expanse, the brilliant rays dart on every side, warming and cheering the whole earth with reviving beams, and finally sinking to his rest in a flood of splendour, more dazzling, more imposing than ever attends his departure when his dawn hath been one of joy. Such is thy career, my brother ; such will be thy glorious fate. Oh, droop not even to me—to thyself ! Hope on, strive on, and thou shalt succeed !”

“Would I had thy hopeful spirit, my Nigel, and it pictured and believed things as these,” mournfully would the Bruce reply, and clasp the young warrior to his heart ; but it was only Nigel’s ear that heard these whispers of despondency, only Nigel’s eye which could penetrate the inmost folds of that royal heart. Not even to his wife—his Margaret, whose faithfulness in these hours of adversity had drawn her yet closer to her husband—did he breathe aught save encouragement and hope ; and to his followers he was the same as he had been from the first, resolute, unwavering ; triumphing over every obstacle ; cheering the faint-hearted ? encouraging the desponding ; smiling with his

young followers, ever on the alert to provide amusement for them, to approve, guide, instruct; gallantly and kindly to smooth the path for his female companions, joining in every accommodation for them, even giving his manual labour with the lowest of his followers, if his aid would lessen fatigue, or more quickly enhance comfort. And often and often in the little encampment we have described, when night fell, and warrior and dame would assemble, in various picturesque groups, on the grassy mound, the king, seated in the midst of them, would read aloud, and divert even the most wearied frame and careworn mind by the stirring scenes and chivalric feelings his MSS. recorded. The talent of deciphering manuscripts, indeed of reading anything, was one seldom attained or even sought for in the age of which we treat; the sword and spear were alike the recreation and the business of the nobles. Reading and writing were in general confined to monks, and the other clergy; but Robert, even as his brother Nigel, possessed both these accomplishments, although to the former their value never seemed so fully known as in his wanderings. His readings were diversified by rude narratives or tales, which he demanded in return from his companions, and many a hearty laugh would resound from the woodland glades, at the characteristic humour with which these demands were complied with; the dance, too, would diversify these meetings. A night of repose might perhaps succeed, to be disturbed at its close by a cause for alarm, and those pleasant resting-places must be abandoned, the happy party be divided, and scattered far and wide, to encounter fatigue, danger, perchance even death, ere they met again.

Yet still they drooped not, murmured not. No voice was ever heard to wish the king's advice had been taken, and they had sought refuge in Norway. Not even Margaret breathed one sigh, dropped one tear, in her husband's presence, although many were the times that she would have sunk from exhaustion, had not Isabella of Buchan been near as her guardian angel to revive, encourage, infuse a portion of her own spirit in the weaker heart, which so confidently clung to her. The youngest and most timid maiden, the oldest and most ailing man, still maintained the same patriotic spirit and resolute devotion which had upheld

them at first. "The Bruce and Scotland" were the words imprinted on their souls, endowed with a power to awake the sinking heart, and rouse the fainting frame.

To Agnes and Nigel, it was shrewdly suspected, these wanderings in the centre of magnificent nature, their hearts open to each other, revelling in the scenes around them, were seasons of unalloyed enjoyment, happiness more perfect than the state and restraint of a court. Precarious, indeed, it was, but even in moments of danger they were not parted; for Nigel was ever the escort of the Countess of Buchan, and danger by his side lost half its terror to Agnes. He left her side but to return to it covered with laurels, unharmed, uninjured, even in the midst of foes; and so frequently did this occur, that the fond, confiding spirit of the young Agnes folded itself around the belief that he bore a charmed life; that evil and death could not injure one so faultless and beloved. Their love grew stronger with each passing week; for nature, beautiful nature, is surely the field of that interchange of thought, for that silent commune of soul so dear to those that love. The simplest flower, the gushing brooks, the frowning hills, the varied hues attending the rising and the setting of the sun, all were turned to poetry when the lips of Nigel spoke to the ears of love. The mind of Agnes expanded before these rich communings. She was so young, so guileless, her character moulded itself on his. She learned yet more to comprehend, to appreciate the nobility of his soul, to cling yet closer to him, as the consciousness of the rich treasure she possessed in his love became more and more unfolded to her view. The natural fearfulness of her disposition gave way, and the firmness, the enthusiasm of purpose took possession of her heart, secretly and silently, indeed; for to all, save to herself, she was the same gentle, timid, clinging girl that she had ever been.

So passed the summer months; but as winter approached, and the prospects of the king remained as apparently hopeless and gloomy as they were on his first taking refuge in the mountains, it was soon pretty evident that some other plan must be resorted to; for strong as the resolution might be, the delicate frames of his female companions, already suffering from the privations to which they had been exposed, could not sustain the intense cold and heavy snows

peculiar to the mountain region. Gallantly as the king had borne himself in every encounter with the English and Anglo-Scots, sustaining with unexampled heroism repeated defeats and blighted hopes, driven from one mountainous district by the fierce opposition of its inhabitants, from another by a cessation of supplies, till famine absolutely threatened, closely followed by its grim attendant, disease, all his efforts to collect and inspire his countrymen with his own spirit, his own hope, were utterly and entirely fruitless, for his enemies appeared to increase around him, the autumn found him as far, if not farther, from the successful termination of his desires than he had been at first.

All Scotland lay at the feet of his foe. John of Lorn, maternally related to the slain Red Comyn, had collected his forces to the number of a thousand, and effectually blockaded his progress through the district of Breadalbane, to which he had retreated from a superior body of English, driving him to a narrow pass in the mountains, where the Bruce's cavalry had no power to be of service; and had it not been for the king's extraordinary exertions in guarding the rear, and there checking the desperate fury of the assailants, and interrupting the headlong pursuit of the fugitives, by a strength, activity, and prudence, that in these days would seem incredible, the patriots must have been cut off to a man. Here it was that the family of Lorn obtained possession of that brooch of Bruce, which even to this day is preserved as a relic, and lauded as a triumph, proving how nearly their redoubted enemy had fallen into their hands. Similar struggles had marked his progress through the mountains ever since the defeat of Methven; but vain was every effort of his foes to obtain possession of his person, destroy his energy, and thus frustrate his purpose. Perth, Inverness, Argyle, and Aberdeen had alternately been the scene of his wanderings. The middle of autumn found him with about a hundred followers, amongst whom were the Countess of Buchan and her son, amid the mountains which divide Kincardine from the south-west boundary of Aberdeen. The remainder of his officers and men, divided into small bands, each with some of their female companions under their especial charge, were scattered over the different districts, as better adapted to concealment and rest.

It was that part of the year when day gives place to

night so suddenly, that the sober calm of twilight even appears denied us. The streams rushed by, turbid and swollen from the heavy autumnal rains. A rude wind had robbed most of the trees of their foliage; the sere and withered leaves, indeed, yet remained on the boughs, beautiful even in their decay, but the slightest breath would carry them away from their resting places, and the mountain passes were incumbered, and often slippery from the fallen leaves. The mountains looked frowning and bare, the pine and fir bent and rocked in their craggy cradles, and the wind moaned through their dark branches sadly and painfully. The sun had, indeed, shone fitfully through the day, but still the scene was one of melancholy desolation, and the heart of the Countess of Buchan, bold and firm in general, could not successfully resist the influence of Nature's sadness. She sat comparatively alone; a covering had, indeed, been thrown over some thick poles, which interwove with brushwood, and with a seat and couch of heather, which was still in flower, formed a rude tent, and was destined for her repose; but until night's dark mantle was fully unfurled, she had preferred the natural seat of a jutting crag, sheltered from the wind by an overhanging rock and some spreading firs. Her companions were scattered in different directions in search of food, as was their wont. Some ten or fifteen men had been left with her, and they were dispersed about the mountain collecting firewood, and a supply of heath and moss for the night encampment; within hail, indeed, but scarcely within sight, for the space where the countess sate commanded little more than protruding crags and stunted trees, and mountains lifting their dark, bare brows to the starless sky.

It was not fear which had usurped dominion in the Lady Isabella's heart, it was that heavy, sluggish, indefinable weight which sometimes clogs the spirit we know not wherefore, until some event following quick upon it forces us, even against our will, to believe it the overhanging shadow of the future which had darkened the present. She was sad, very sad, yet she could not, as was ever her custom, bring that sadness to judgment, and impartially examining and determining its cause, remove it if possible, or banish it resolutely from her thoughts.

An impulse indefinable, yet impossible to be resisted,

had caused her to intrust her Agnes to the care of Lady Mary and Nigel, and compelled her to follow her son, who had been the chosen companion of the king. Rigidly, sternly, she had questioned her own heart as to the motives of this decision. It was nothing new her accompanying her son, for she had invariably done so ; but it was something unusual her being separated from the queen, and though her heart told her that her motives were so upright, so pure, they could have borne the sternest scrutiny, there was nought which the most rigid mentor could condemn, yet a feeling that evil would come of this was amongst the many others which weighed on her heart. She could not tell wherefore, yet she wished it had been otherwise, wished the honour of being selected as the king's companion had fallen on other than her son, for separate herself from him she could not. One cause of this despondency might have been traced to the natural sinking of the spirit when it finds itself alone, with time for its own fancies, after a long period of exertion, and that mental excitement which, unseen to all outward observers, preys upon itself. Memory had awakened dreams and visions she had long looked upon as dead ; it did but picture brightly, beautifully, joyously, what might have been, and disturbed the tranquil sadness which was usual to her now ; disturb it as with phantasmagoria dancing on the brain, yet it was a struggle hard and fierce to banish them again. As one sweet fancy sunk another rose, even as gleams of moonlight on the waves which rise and fall with every breeze. Fancy and reason strove for dominion, but the latter conquered. What could be now the past, save as a vision of the night ; the present, a stern reality with all its duties—duties not alone to others, but to herself. These were the things on which her thoughts must dwell ; these must banish all which might have been, and they did ; and Isabella of Buchan came through that fiery ordeal unscathed, uninjured in her self-esteem, conscious that not in one thought did she wrong her husband, in not one dream did she wrong the gentle heart of the queen which so clung to her ; in not the wildest flight of fancy did she look on Robert as aught save as the deliverer of his country, the king of all true Scottish men.

She rose up from that weakness of suffering, strengthened in her resolve to use every energy in the queen's service, in

supporting, encouraging, endeavouring so to work on her appreciation of her husband's character, as to render her yet more worthy of his love. She had ever sought to remain beside the queen, ever contrived they should be of the same party; that her mind was ever on the stretch, on the excitement, could not be denied, but she knew not how great its extent, till the call for exertion was comparatively over, and she found herself, she scarcely understood how, the only female companion of her sovereign, the situation she had most dreaded, most determined to avoid. While engaged in the performance of her arduous task, the schooling her own heart and devoting herself to Robert's wife, virtue seemed to have had its own reward, for a new spirit had entwined her whole being, excitement, internal as it was, had given a glow to thought and action, but in her present solitude the reaction of spirit fell upon her as a dull, sluggish weight of lead. She had suffered, too, from both privation and fatigue, and she was aware her strength was failing, and this perhaps was another cause of her depression; but be that as it may, darkness closed around her unobserved, and when startled by some sudden sound, she raised her head from her hands, she could scarcely discern one object from another in the density of gloom.

"Surely night has come suddenly upon us," she said, half aloud; "it is strange they have not yet returned," and rising, she was about seeking the tent prepared for her, when a rude grasp was laid on her arm, and a harsh, unknown voice uttered, in suppressed accents—

"Not so fast, fair mistress, not so fast! My way does not lie in that direction, and with your leave, my way is yours."

"How, man! fellow, detain me at your peril?" answered the countess, sternly, permitting no trace of terror to falter in her voice, although a drawn sword gleamed by her side, and a gigantic form, fully armed, had grasped her arm. "Unhand me, or I will summon those that will force thee. I am not alone, and bethink thee, insult to me will pass not with impunity."

The man laughed scornfully. "Boldly answered, fair one," he said, "of a truth thou art a brave one. I grieve such an office should descend upon me as the detention of so stout a heart; yet even so. In King Edward's name you are my prisoner."

"Your prisoner, and wherefore?" demanded the countess, believing that calmness would be a better protection than any symptoms of fear. "You are mistaken, good friend, I knew not Edward warred with women."

"Prove my mistake, fair mistress, and I will crave your pardon," replied the man. "We have certain intelligence that a party of Scottish rebels, their quondam king perhaps among them, are hidden in these mountains. Give us trusty news of their movements, show us their track, and Edward will hold you in high favour, and grant liberty and rich presents in excuse of his servant's too great vigilance. Hearst thou, what is the track of these rebels—what their movements?"

"Thou art a sorry fool, Murdock," retorted another voice, before the countess could reply, and hastily glancing around, she beheld herself surrounded by armed men; "a sorry fool, an thou wastest the precious darkness thus. Is not one rank rebel sufficient, think you, to satisfy our lord? he will get intelligence enough out of her, be sure. Isabella of Buchan is not fool enough to hold parley with such as we, rely on't."

A suppressed exclamation of exultation answered the utterance of that name, and without further parley, the arms of the countess were strongly pinioned, and with the quickness of thought the man who had first spoken raised her in his arms, and bore her through the thickest brushwood and wildest crags in quite the contrary direction to the encampment; their movements accelerated by the fact that, ere her arms were confined, the countess, with admirable presence of mind, had raised to her lips a silver whistle attached to her girdle, and blown a shrill, distinct blast. A moment sufficed to rudely tear it from her hand, and hurry her off as we have said; and when that call was answered, which it was as soon as the men scattered on the mountain sufficiently recognised the sound, they flung down their tools, and sprung to the side whence it came, but there was no sign, no trace of her they sought; they scoured with lighted torches every mossy path or craggy slope, but in vain; places of concealment were too numerous, the darkness too intense, save just the space illumined by the torch, to permit success. The trampling of horses announced the return of the king and his companions, ere their search was concluded;

his bugle summoned the stragglers, and speedily the loss of the countess was ascertained, their fruitless search narrated, and anxiety and alarm spread over the minds of all. The agony of the youthful Alan surpassed description, even the efforts of his sovereign failed to calm him. Nor was the Bruce himself much less agitated.

"She did wrong, she did wrong," he said, "to leave herself so long unguarded; yet who was there to commit this outrage? There is some treachery here, which we must sift; we must not leave our noble countrywoman in the hands of these marauders. Trust me, Alan, we shall recover her yet."

But the night promised ill for the fulfilment of this trust. Many hours passed in an utterly fruitless search, and about one hour before midnight a thick fog increased the dense gloom, and even prevented all assistance from the torches, for not ten yards before them was distinguishable. Dispirited and disappointed, the king and his companions threw themselves around the watchfires, in gloomy meditation, starting at the smallest sound, and determined to renew their search with the first gleam of dawn; the hurried pace of Alan, as he strode up and down, for he could not rest, alone disturbing the stillness all around.

CHAPTER XIII.

It was already two hours after midnight when a hurried tread, distinct from Alan's restless pacing, disturbed the watchers, and occasioned many to raise themselves on their elbows and listen.

It came nearer and nearer, and very soon a young lad, recognised as Sir Alan's page, was discerned, springing from crag to crag in breathless haste, and finally threw himself at his sovereign's feet.

"It is not too late—up, up, and save her!" were the only words he had power to gasp, panting painfully for the breath of which speed had deprived him. His hair and dress were heavy with the damp occasioned by the fog, and his whole appearance denoting no common agitation.

"Where?" "How?" "What knowest thou?" "Speak

out," "What ailest thee, boy?" were the eager words uttered at once by all, and the king and others sprung to their feet, while Alan laid a heavy hand on the boy's shoulder, and glared on him in silence; the lad's glance fell beneath his, and he sobbed forth—

"Mercy, mercy! my thoughtlessness has done this, yet I guessed not, dreamed not this ill would follow. But, oh, do not wait for my tale now; up, up, and save her ere it be too late!"

"And how may we trust thee now, an this is the effect of former treachery?" demanded Robert, with a sternness that seemed to awe the terrified boy into composure.

"I am not treacherous, sire. No, no! I would have exposed my throat to your grace's sword rather than do a traitor's deed: trust me, oh, trust me, and follow without delay."

"Speak first, and clearly," answered Alan, fiercely, "even for my mother's sake the sacred person of the king of Scotland shall not be risked by a craven's word. Speak, an thou wouldst bid us trust thee—speak I charge thee."

"He is right—he is right; let him explain this mystery ere we follow," echoed round; and thus urged, the boy's tale was hurriedly told.

It was simply this. Some days previous, when wandering alone about the rocks, he had met a woodman, whom he recognised as one of the retainers of Buchan, and as such, believed him as loyal and faithful to King Robert's interest as himself and others in the countess's train. The man had artfully evaded all young Malcolm's expressions of astonishment and inquiries as to why Donald Mac-Alpine, whom he well knew to be one of the stoutest and most sturdy men-at-arms which the clan possessed, should have taken to so peaceful an employment as cutting wood, and skilfully drew from the boy much information concerning the movements of the party to whom he belonged. Malcolm freely spoke of Sir Alan and the Countess of Buchan, dilating with no little pleasure on his young master having received knighthood at the hand of his king, and all the honours and delights which accompanied it. Aware, however, of the dangers which environed the Bruce, he spoke of him more cautiously, and the more Donald sought to discover if the king were near at hand, the more carefully did Mal-

colm conceal that he was, telling the woodman if he wished to know all particulars, he had better turn his sickle into a spear, his cap into a helmet, and strike a good blow for Scotland and King Robert. This the man refused to do, alleging he loved his own sturdy person and independent freedom too well to run his neck into such a noose; that King Robert might do very well for a while, but eventually he must fall into King Edward's hands. Malcolm angrily denied this, and they parted, not the best friends imaginable. On reviewing all that had passed, the boy reproached himself incessantly for having said too much, and was continually tormented by an indefinable fear that some evil would follow. This fear kept him by the side of the countess, instead of, as was his wont, following Sir Alan to the chase. The increasing darkness had concealed her from him, but he was the first to distinguish her whistle. He had reached the spot time enough to recognise the supposed woodman in the second speaker, and to feel with painful acuteness his boyish thoughtlessness had brought this evil on a mistress, to serve whom he would willingly have laid down his life. Resistance he knew, on his part, was utterly useless, and therefore he determined to follow their track, and thus bring accurate intelligence to the king. The minds of the men preoccupied by the thought of their distinguished prisoner, and the thickening gloom, aided his resolution. Happening to have a quantity of thick flax in his pocket, the boy, with admirable foresight, fastened it to different shrubs and stones as he passed, and thus secured his safe return; a precaution very necessary, as from the windings and declivities, and in parts well-nigh impregnable hollows, into which he followed the men, his return in time would have been utterly frustrated.

The gathering mist had occasioned a halt, and a consultation as to whether they could reach the encampment to which they belonged, or whether it would not be better to halt till dawn. They had decided in favour of the latter, fearing, did they continue marching, they might lose their track, and perhaps fall in with the foe. He had waited, he said, till he saw them making such evident preparations for a halt of some hours, that he felt certain they would not remove till daylight. It was a difficult and precarious path, he said, yet he was quite sure he could lead fifteen or

twenty men easily to the spot, and, taken by surprise, nothing would prevent the recovery of the countess ; less than two hours would take them there.

This tale was told in less time than we have taken to transcribe it, and not twenty minutes after Malcolm's first appearance, the king and Sir Alan, with fifteen tried followers, departed on their expedition. There had been some attempt to dissuade the king from venturing his own person where farther treachery might yet lurk, but the attempt was vain.

"She has perilled her life for me," was his sole answer, "and were there any real peril, mine would be hazarded for her ; but there is none—'tis but a child's work we are about to do, not even glory enough to call for envy."

The fog had sufficiently cleared to permit of their distinguishing the route marked out by Malcolm, but not enough to betray their advance, even had there been scouts set to watch the pass. Not a word passed between them. Rapidly, stealthily they advanced, and about three in the morning stood within sight of their foes, though still unseen themselves. There was little appearance of caution : two large fires had been kindled, round one of which ten or twelve men were stretched their full length, still armed indeed, and their hands clasping their unsheathed swords, but their senses fast locked in slumber. Near the other, her arms and feet pinioned, Alan, with a heart beating almost audibly with indignation, recognised his mother. Two men, armed with clubs, walked up and down beside her, and seven others were grouped in various attitudes at her feet, most of them fast asleep. It was evident that they had no idea of surprise, and that their only fear was associated with the escape of their prisoner.

"They are little more than man to man," said the Bruce ; "therefore is there no need for farther surprise than will attend the blast of your bugle, Sir Alan. Sound the reveillé, and on to the rescue."

He was obeyed, and the slumberers, with suppressed oaths, started to their feet, glancing around them a brief minute in inquiring astonishment as to whence the sound came. It was speedily explained : man after man sprang through the thicket, and rushed upon the foes, several of whom, gathering themselves around their prisoner, seemed

determined that her liberty should not be attained with her life, more than once causing the swords of the Bruce's followers to turn aside in their rapid descent, lest they should injure her they sought to save. Like a young lion Alan fought, ably seconded by the king, whose gigantic efforts clearing his path, at length enabled himself and Alan to stand uninjured beside the countess, and thus obtain possession of her person, and guard her from the injury to which her captors voluntarily exposed her. There was at first no attempt at flight, although the Bruce's men carried all before them; the men fell where they stood, till only five remained, and these, after a moment's hesitation, turned and fled. A shrill cry from Malcolm had turned the king's and Alan's attention in another direction, and it was well they did so. Determined on foiling the efforts of his foes, Donald Mac-Alpine, who was supposed to be among the fallen, had stealthily approached the spot where the countess, overcome with excessive faintness, still reclined, then noiselessly rising, his sword was descending on her unguarded head, when Alan, aroused by Malcolm's voice, turned upon him and dashed his weapon from his grasp, at the same minute that the Bruce's sword pierced the traitor's heart; he sprung into the air with a loud yell of agony, and fell, nearly crushing the countess with his weight.

It was the voice of Alan which aroused that fainting heart. It was in the bosom of her son those tearful eyes were hid, after one startled and bewildered gaze on the countenance of her sovereign, who had been leaning over her in unfeigned anxiety. A thicket of thorn, mingled with crags, divided her from the unseemly signs of the late affray; but though there was nought to renew alarm, it was with a cold shudder she had clung to her son, as if even her firm, bold spirit had given way. Gently, cheerily the king addressed her, and she evidently struggled to regain composure; but her powers of body were evidently so prostrated, that her friends felt rest of some kind she must have, ere she could regain sufficient strength to accompany them on their wanderings. She had received three or four wounds in the *mêlée*, which though slight, the loss of blood that had followed materially increased her weakness, and the king anxiously summoned his friends around him to deliberate on the best measures to pursue.

Amongst them were two of Sir Alan's retainers, old and faithful Scottish men, coeval with his grandfather, the late Earl of Buchan. Devoted alike to the countess, the king, and their country, they eagerly listened to all that was passing, declaring that rather than leave the Lady Isabella in a situation of such danger as the present, they would take it by turns to carry her in their arms to the encampment. The king listened with a benevolent smile.

"Is there no hut or house, or hunting lodge to which we could convey your lady," he asked, "where she might find quieter shelter and greater rest than hitherto? An ye knew of such, it would be the wiser plan to seek it at break of day."

A hunting-lodge, belonging to the Earl of Buchan, there was, or ought to be, the old men said, near the head of the Tay, just at the entrance of Athol Forest. It had not been used since their old master's days; he had been very partial to it when a boy, and was continually there; it had most likely fallen into decay from disuse, as they believed the present earl did not even know of its existence, but that was all the better, as it would be a still more safe and secure retreat for the countess, and they were sure, when once out of the hollows and intricacies of their present halting-place, they could easily discover the path to it.

And how long did they think it would be, the king inquired, before their lady could be taken to it? the sooner, they must perceive as well as himself, the better for her comfort. He was relieved when they declared that two days, or at the very utmost three, would bring them there, if, as the old men earnestly entreated he would, they retraced their steps to the encampment as soon as daylight was sufficiently strong for them clearly to distinguish their path. This was unanimously resolved on, and the few intervening hours were spent by the countess in calm repose.

Conscious that filial affection watched over her, the sleep of the countess tranquillized her sufficiently to commence the return to the encampment with less painful evidences of exhaustion. A rude litter waited for her, in which she could recline when the pass allowed its safe passage, and which could be easily borne by the bearers when the intricacies of the path prevented all egress save by pedestrianism. It had been hurriedly made by her devoted adherents, and

soothed and gratified, her usual energy seemed for the moment to return. By nine o'clock before noon all traces of the Bruce and his party had departed from the glen, the last gleam of their armour was lost in the winding path, and then it was that a man, who had lain concealed in a thicket from the moment of the affray, hearing all that had passed, unseen himself, now slowly, cautiously raised himself on his knees, gazed carefully round him, then with a quicker but as silent motion sprang to his feet, and raised his hands in an action of triumph.

"*He is amongst them, then,*" he muttered, "the traitor Bruce himself. This is well. The Countess, her son, and the would-be king—ha! ha! My fortune's made!" and he bounded away in quite a contrary direction to that taken by the Bruce.

The old retainers of Buchan were correct in their surmises. The evening of the second day succeeding the event we have narrated brought them to the hunting-lodge. It was indeed very old, and parts had fallen almost to ruins, but there was still three or four rooms remaining, whose compact walls and well-closed roofs rendered them a warm and welcome refuge for the Countess of Buchan, whose strenuous exertions the two preceding days had ended, as was expected, by exhaustion more painful and overpowering than before.

The exertions of her friends—for the Bruce and his followers with one consent had premitted their wanderings to be guided by the old men,—speedily rendered the apartments habitable. Large fires were soon blazing on the spacious hearths, and ere night fell, all appearance of damp and discomfort had vanished. The frugal supper was that night a jovial meal; the very look of a cheerful blaze beneath a walled roof was reviving to the wanderers; the jest passed round, the wine-cup sparkled to the health of the countess, and many a fervent aspiration echoed round for the speedy restoration of her strength; for truly she was the beloved, the venerated of all, alike from her sovereign to his lowest follower.

"Trust my experience, my young knight," had been the Bruce's address to Alan ere they parted for the night. "A few days' complete repose will quite restore your valued parent and my most honoured friend. This hunting-

lodge shall be our place of rendezvous for a time, till she is sufficiently restored to accompany us southward. You are satisfied, are you not, with the diligence of our scouts?"

"Perfectly, your highness," was Alan's reply; for well-tried and intelligent men had been sent in every direction to discover, if possible, to what party of the enemy the captors of the Lady Isabella belonged, and to note well the movements and appearance, not only of any martial force, but of the country people themselves. They had executed their mission as well as the intricate passes and concealed hollows of the mountains premitted, and brought back the welcome intelligence, that for miles round the country was perfectly clear, and to all appearance peaceful. The hunting-lodge, too, was so completely hidden by dark woods of pine and overhanging crags, that even had there been foes prowling about the mountains, they might pass within twenty yards of its vicinity and yet fail to discover it. The very path leading to the bottom of the hollow in which it stood was concealed at the entrance by thick shrubs and an arch of rock, which had either fallen naturally into that shape, or been formed by the architects of the lodge. It seemed barely possible that the retreat could be discovered, except by the basest treachery, and therefore the king and Sir Alan felt perfectly at rest regarding the safety of the countess, even though they could only leave with her a guard of some twenty or thirty men.

So much was she refreshed the following morning, that the hopes of her son brightened, and with that filial devotion so peculiarly his characteristic, he easily obtained leave of absence from his sovereign, to remain by the couch of his mother for at least that day, instead of accompanying him, as was his wont, in the expeditions of the day. The countess combated this decision, but in vain. Alan was resolved. He was convinced, he said, her former capture, and all its ill consequences, would not have taken place had he been by her side; and even were she not now exposed to such indignity, she would be lonely and sad without him, and stay, in consequence, he would. The king and his officers approved of the youth's resolution, and reluctantly Isabella yielded.

About two hours before noon the Bruce and his com-

panions departed, desiring Sir Alan not to expect their return till near midnight, as they intended penetrating a part of the country which had not yet been explored; they might be a few hours sooner, but they scarcely expected it. It was afterwards remembered that a peculiar expression of sadness overclouded the countenance of the countess, as for a moment she fixed her speaking eyes on the king's face when he cheerfully bade her farewell, and said, in a low emphatic voice—

“Farewell, sire! It may be the hour of meeting is longer deferred than we either of us now believe. Fain would I beseech your grace to grant me one boon, make me but one promise ere you depart.”

“Any boon, any promise that our faithful friend and subject can demand, is granted ere 'tis asked,” answered the king, without a moment's pause, though startled alike at the expression of her features and the sadness of her voice. “Gladly would we give any pledge that could in any way bespeak our warm sense of thy true merit, lady; therefore speak, and fear not.”

“'Tis simply this, sire,” she said, and her voice was still mournful, despite her every effort to prevent its being so. “Should unforeseen evil befall me, captivity, danger of death, or aught undreamed of now, give me your royal word as a knight and king, that you will not peril your sacred person, and with it the weal and liberty of our unhappy country, for my sake, but leave me to my fate; 'tis a strange and fanciful boon, yet, gracious sovereign, refuse it not. I mean not treachery such as we have encountered, where your grace's noble gallantry rescued me with little peril to yourself. No. I mean other and greater danger; where I well know that rather than leave me exposed to the wrath of my husband and Edward of England, you would risk your own precious life, and with it the liberty of Scotland. Grant me this boon, my liege, and perchance this heavy weight upon my spirit will pass and leave me free.”

“Nay, 'tis such a strange and unknighly promise, lady, how may I pledge my word to its fulfilment?” answered Robert, gravely and sadly. “You bid me pledge mine honour to a deed that will stain my name with an everlasting infamy, that even the liberty of Scotland will not wash away. How may I do this thing? You press me sorely,

lady. Even for thee, good and faithful as thou art, how may I hurt my knightly fame?"

"Sire, thou wilt not," she returned, still more entreatingly; "thy brilliant fame, thy noble name will never, can never receive a stain. I do but ask a promise whose fulfilment may never be demanded. I do but bid thee remember thou art not only a knight, a noble, a king, but one by whom the preservation, the independence of our country can alone be achieved—one on whose safety and freedom depends the welfare of a nation, the unchanged glory of her sons. Were death thy portion, Scotland lies a slave for ever at the feet of England, and therefore is it I do beseech thee, King of Scotland, make me this pledge. I know thy noble spirit well, and I know thy too chivalric honour would blind thee to a sense of danger, to a sense of country, duty, glory, of all save the rescue of one who, though she be faithful to thee and to her country, is but as a drop of water in the ocean, compared to other claims. My liege, thy word is already in part pledged," she continued, more proudly. "Any pledge or promise I might demand is granted ere it is asked, your highness deigned to say; thou canst not retract it now."

"And wherefore shouldst thou, royal brother?" cheerfully interrupted Alexander Bruce. "The Lady Isabella asks not unreasonably, she does but suggest *what may be*, although that may be is, as we all know, next to impossible, particularly now when Nature has fortified this pleasant lodge even as would a garrison of some hundred men. Come, be not so churlish in thy favours, good my liege; give her the pledge she demands, and be sure its fulfilment will never be required."

"Could I but think so," he replied, still gravely. "Lady, I do entreat thee, tell me wherefore thou demandest this strange boon; fearest thou evil—drestest thou aught of danger hovering near? If so, as there is a God in heaven, I will not go forth to-day!"

"Pardon me, gracious sovereign," answered Isabella, evasively; "I ask it, because since the late adventure there has been a weight upon my spirits as if I, impotent, of little consequence as I am, yet even I might be the means of hurling down evil on thy head, and through thee on Scotland; and therefore, until thy promise to the effect I have

specified is given, I cannot, I will not rest—even though, as Lord Alexander justly believes, its fulfilment will never be required. Evil here, my liege, trust me, cannot be; therefore go forth in confidence. I fear not to await your return, e'en should I linger here alone. Grant but my boon."

"Nay, an it must be, lady, I promise all thou demandest," answered Bruce, more cheerfully, for her words reassured him; "but, by mine honour, thou hast asked neither well nor kindly. Remember, my pledge is passed but for real danger, and that only for Scotland's sake, not for mine own; and now, farewell, lady. I trust, ere we meet again, these depressing fancies will have left thee."

"They have well-nigh departed now, my liege; 'twas simply for thee and Scotland these heavy bodings oppressed me. My son," she added, after a brief pause, "I would your highness could prevail on him to accompany you to-day. Wherefore should he stay with me?"

"Wherefore not rather, lady?" replied the king, smiling. "I may not leave thee to thine own thoughts to weave fresh boons like to the last. No, no! our young knight must guard thee till we meet again," and with these words he departed. They did not, however, deter the countess from resuming her persuasions to Alan to accompany his sovereign, but without success. Isabella of Buchan had, however, in this instance departed from her usual strict adherence to the truth; she did not feel so secure that no evil would befall her in the absence of the Bruce, as she had endeavoured to make him believe.

Some words she had caught during her brief captivity caused her, she scarcely knew why, to believe that the Earl of Buchan himself was in the neighbourhood; nay, that the very party which had captured her were members of the army under his command. She had gathered, too, that it was a very much larger force than the king's, and therefore it was that she had made no objection to Robert's wish that she should rest some few days in the hunting-lodge. She knew that, however her failing strength might detain and harass their movements, Bruce and his followers would never consent to leave her, unless, as in the present case, under a comparatively comfortable roof and well-concealed shelter; and she knew too, that however she might struggle to accompany them in their wanderings, the struggle in her

present exhausted state would be utterly in vain, and lingering for her might expose her sovereign to a renewal of the ills with which he had already striven so nobly, and perchance, to yet more irreparable misfortune. The information of the scouts had partially reassured her, at least to the fact that no immediate danger was to be apprehended, and for awhile she indulged the hope that safety might be found in this hidden spot until the peril passed. She had full confidence in the fidelity of the old retainers who had guided them to the spot, and sought to feel satisfied that its vicinity was unknown to the earl, her husband; but whether from the restlessness of a slight degree of fever, or from that nervous state of mind attendant on worn-out strength, ere the Bruce departed the same foreboding came on her again, and all her desire was the absence of her sovereign and his followers, to have some hold upon his almost too exalted sense of chivalry, which would prevent any rash act of daring on his part; and this, as we have seen, she obtained.

Could she but have prevailed on her son to accompany them, she would calmly and resignedly have awaited her fate, whatever it might be; but the horror of beholding him a prisoner in the hands of his father—that father perhaps so enraged at the boy's daring opposition to his will and political opinions, that he would give him up at once to the wrath of Edward—was a picture of anguish from which her mind revolted in such intense suffering, she could not rest. She strove with the fancy; she sought to rouse every energy, to feel secure in her present resting-place. But who can resist the influence of feelings such as these? What mother's heart cannot enter into the emotions of Isabella of Buchan, as she gazed on her noble boy, improved as he was in manliness and beauty, and with the dread anticipation of evil, believing only absence could protect him; that perchance the very love which kept him by her side would expose him to danger, imprisonment, and death? She did not speak her fears, but Alan vainly sought to soothe that unwonted restlessness. She had endeavoured to secure the Bruce's safety by the aid of Malcolm, the young page, by whose instrumentality she had been both captured and released. Taking advantage of Sir Alan's absence she had called the boy to her side, and made him

promise that, at the first manifest sign of danger, he would make his escape, which, by his extreme agility and address, would easily be achieved, seek the king, and give him exact information of the numbers, strength, and situation of the foes, reminding him, at the same time, of his solemn pledge. She made him promise the profoundest secrecy, and adjured him at all hazards to save the king.

The boy, affected by the solemnity of her manner, promised faithfully to observe her minutest sign, and on the re-entrance of Sir Alan departed, to marvel wherefore his lady should so have spoken, and examine the localities around, as to the best means of concealment and escape.

The hours waned, and night fell, as is usual in October, some five hours after noon, the gloom perhaps greatly increased by the deep shades in which their place of concealment lay. Sir Alan roused the fire to a cheerful blaze, and lighting a torch of pine-wood, placed it in an iron bracket projecting from the wall, and amused himself by polishing his arms, and talking in that joyous tone his mother so loved, on every subject that his affection fancied might interest and amuse her. He was wholly unarmed, except his sword, which, secured to his waist by a crimson sash, he never laid aside; and fair and graceful to his mother's eye did he look in his simple doublet of Lincoln-green, cut and slashed with ruby velvet, his dark curls clustering round his bare throat, and his bright face beaming in all the animation of youth and health, spiritualized by the deeper feelings of his soul; and she, too, was still beautiful, though her frame was slighter, her features more attenuated than when we first beheld her. He had insisted on her reclining on the couch, and drawn from her otherwise painful thoughts by his animated sallies, smiles circled her pale lip, and her sorrows were awhile forgotten.

An hour, perhaps rather more, elapsed, and found the mother and son still as we have described. There had been no sound without, but about that period many heavy footsteps might have been distinguished, cautiously, it seemed, advancing. Alan started up and listened; the impatient neigh of a charger was heard, and then voices suppressed, yet, as he fancied, familiar.

"King Robert returned already," he exclaimed; "they

must have had an unusually successful chase. I must e'en seek them and inquire."

"Alan! my child!" He started at the voice, it was so unlike his mother's. She had risen and flung her arm around him with a pressure so convulsive, he looked at her with terror. There was no time to answer; a sudden noise usurped the place of the previous stillness—a struggle—a heavy fall; the door was flung rudely open, and an armed man stood upon the threshold, his vizor up, but even had it not been, the heart of the countess too truly told her she gazed upon her husband!

CHAPTER XIV.

A BRIEF pause followed the entrance of this unexpected visitor. Standing upon the threshold, his dark brow knit, his eyes fixed on his prisoners, the Earl of Buchan stood a few minutes immovable. Alan saw but a mail-clad warrior, more fierce and brutal in appearance than the generality of their foes, and felt, with all that heart-sinking despondency natural to youth, that they were betrayed, that resistance was in vain, for heavier and louder grew the tramp of horse and man, and the narrow passage, discernible through the open door, was filled with steel-clad forms, their drawn swords glancing in the torchlight, their dark brows gleaming in ill-concealed triumph. Alan was still a boy in years, despite his experience as a warrior, and in the first agony of this discovery, the first dream of chains and captivity, when his young spirit revelled in the thought of freedom, and joyed as a bird in the fresh air of mount and stream, weaving bright hopes, not exile or wandering could remove, his impulse had been to dash his useless sword in anguish to the earth, and weep; but the sight of his mother checked that internal weakness. He felt her convulsive clasp; he beheld the expression on her features, —how unlike their wont—terror, suffering, whose *entire* cause he vainly endeavoured to define, and he roused himself for her. And she, did she see more than her son? She *knew* that face, and as she gazed, she felt hope had departed; she beheld nought but a long, endless vista of anguish; yet

she felt not for herself, she thought but of her child. And the earl, can we define his exulting mood?—it was the malice, the triumph of a fiend.

“Who and what art thou?” demanded Alan, fiercely, laying his right hand on his sword, and with the left firmly clasping his mother’s waist. “What bold knight and honourable chevalier art thou, thus seeking by stealth the retreat of a wanderer, and overpowering by numbers and treachery men, who on the field thou and such as thou had never dared to meet?”

The earl laughed; that bitter, biting laugh of contempt and triumph so difficult to bear.

“Thou hast a worthy tongue, my pretty springald,” said he; “canst thou use thy sword as bravely? Who and what am I? ask of the lady thou hast so caressingly encircled with thine arm, perchance she can give thee information.”

Alan started, a cold thrill passed through his frame, as the real cause of his mother’s terror flashed on his mind; her lips, parched and quivering, parted as to speak, but there was no sound.

“Mother,” he said, “mother, speak to thy son. Why, why art thou thus? it is not the dread of imprisonment, of death. No, no; they have no terrors for such as thee. Who is this man?”

Engrossed in his own agitation, Alan had not heard the muttered exclamation which burst from Buchan’s lips with his first words, for great was the earl’s surprise as he looked on his son; the impression he was still a child had remained on his mind despite all reports to the contrary, but no softer feeling obtained dominion.

“Who and what am I?” he continued, after a brief pause. “Wouldst thou know, Alan of Buchan? Even a faithful knight, soldier, and subject of his Royal Highness Edward, king of England and Scotland, and consequently thy foe; the insulted and dishonoured husband of the woman thou callest mother, and consequently thy father, young man. Ha! have I spoken home? Thy sword, thy sword; acknowledge thy disloyalty to thy father and king, and for thee all may yet be well.”

“Never!” answered Alan, proudly, the earl’s concluding words rousing the spirit which the knowledge of beholding

his father and the emotion of his mother seemed to have crushed. "Never, Lord of Buchan, for father I cannot call thee. Thou mayest force me to resign my sword, thou mayest bring me to the block, but acknowledge allegiance to a foreign tyrant, who hath no claims on Scotland or her sons, save those of hate and detestation, that thou canst never do, even if thy sword be pointed at my heart."

"Boy!" burst from the earl's lips, in accents of irrepressible rage, but he checked himself; "thou hast learned a goodly lesson of disobedience and daring, of a truth, and I should tender grateful thanks to thy most worthy, most efficient and virtuous teacher," he added, in his own bitterly sarcastic tone. "The Lady Isabella deems, perchance she has done her duty to her husband in placing a crown on the head of his hereditary and hated foe, and leading his son in the same path of rebellion and disloyalty, and giving his service to the murderer of his kinsman."

"Earl of Buchan, I have done my duty alike to my country and my son," replied the countess, her high spirit roused by the taunts of her husband. "According to the dictates of my conscience, mine honour as a Scottish woman, the mother of a Scottish warrior, I have done my duty, and neither imprisonment, nor torture, nor death will bid me retract those principles or waver in my acknowledgement of Scotland and her king. Pardon me, my lord; but there is no rebellion in resisting the infringement of a tyrant, no disloyalty in raising the standard against Edward, for there is no treason when there is no lawful authority; and by what right is Edward of England king of Scotland? Lord of Buchan, I *have* done my duty. As my father taught *me* I have taught my child!"

"Regarding, of course, madam, all which that child's father would have taught him, particularly that most Christian virtue returning good for evil, as in the fact of revenging the death of a kinsman with the gift of a crown. Oh! thou hast done well, most intrinsically well."

"I own no relationship with a traitor," burst impetuously from Alan. "Sir John Comyn was honoured in his death, for the sword of the Bruce was too worthy a weapon for the black heart of a traitor. Lord of Buchan, we are in thy power, it is enough. Hadst thou wished thy son to imbibe thy peculiar principles, to forget his country and her rights,

it had been better perchance hadst thou remembered thou hadst a child—a son. Had the duty of a father been performed, perchance I had not now forgotten mine as a son! As it is, we stand as strangers and as foes. Against thee in truth I will not raise my sword; but further, we are severed and for ever!” He crossed his arms proudly on his bosom, and returned the dark, scowling glance of his father with a flashing eye, and a mien as firm and nobler than his own.

“It is well, young man; I thank you for my freedom,” returned the earl, between his teeth. “As my son, I might stand between thee and Edward’s wrath; as a stranger and my foe, why, whate’er his sentence be—the axe and block without doubt—let it work, it will move me little.”

“Heed not his rash words, in mercy, heed them not!” exclaimed the countess, her voice of agony contrasting strangely with its former proud reserve. “Neglected, forgotten him as thou hast, yet, Lord of Buchan, he is still thy son. Oh, in mercy, expose him not to the deadly wrath of Edward! thou canst save him, thou canst give him freedom. It is I—I who am the attainted traitor, not my child. Give me up to Edward, and he will heed not, ask not for thy son. It is I who have offended him and thee, not my child. Art thou not a Scottish noble, descendant of a house as purely loyal and devoted to their country as mine own—art thou not indeed this man, and yet hath Edward, the deadly foe of thy race, thy land, thy countrymen, more exalted claims than thine own blood? No, no, it cannot be! thou wilt relent, thou wilt have mercy; let him be but free, and do with me even what thou wilt!”

“Free! go free!” repeated the earl, with a hoarse laugh, ere Alan could interfere. “Let him go free, forsooth, when he tells me he is my foe, and will go hence and join my bitterest enemies the moment he is free. Go free! and who art thou who askest this boon? Hast thou such claims upon me, that for thy pleasure I should give freedom to thy son?”

“My lord, my lord, ’tis for thine own sake, for his, thy child as well as mine, I do beseech, implore thy mercy! draw not the curse of heaven on thy heart by exposing him to death. Thou wilt know and feel him as indeed thy child when he lies bleeding before thee, when thine own hand hath forged the death-bolt, and then, then it will be

too late ; thou wilt yearn for his voice in vain. Oh ! is it not sufficient triumph to have in thy power the wife who hath dared thy authority, who hath joined the patriot band, and so drawn down on her the vengeance of Edward ? The price of a traitor is set upon her head. My lord, my lord, is not one victim enough—will not my capture ensure thee reward and honour in the court of Edward ? Then do with me what thou wilt—chains, torture, death ; but my child, my brave boy—oh, if thou hast one spark of mercy in thy heart, let him go !”

“Mother,” hoarsely murmured Alan, as he strove to raise her from her suppliant posture, “mother, this shall not be ! look upon that face and know thou pleadest in vain. I will not accept my freedom at such a price ; thy knee, thy supplications unto a heart of stone, for me. No, no ; mother, dear mother, we will die together !”

“Thou shalt not, thou shalt not, my beloved, my beautiful ! thy death will be on my head, though it come from a father’s hand. I will plead, I will be heard ! My lord, my lord,” she continued, wrought to a pitch of agonized feeling, no heart save that to which she pleaded could have heard unmoved, “I ask but his freedom, the freedom of a boy, a child—and of whom do I ask ?—of his father, his own father. Speak to me, answer me ; thou canst not be so lost to the voice, the feelings of nature. For the sake of the mother who loved, the father who blessed *thee*, whose blessing hallowed our union and smiled on our infant boy, have mercy on me, on thyself—let him, oh, let him be free !”

“Mercy on thee, thou false and perjured woman !” the earl burst forth, the cold sarcastic expression with which he had at first listened to her impassioned entreaties giving way to the fearful index of ungoverned rage ; “on thee, thou false traitress, not alone to thy husband’s principles but to his honour ! Do I not know thee, minion—do I not know the motives of thy conduct in leaving thy husband’s castle for the court of Bruce ? Patriotism, forsooth—patriotism, ha ! the patriotism that had vent in giving and receiving love from him ; it was so easy to do homage to him in public as thy king. Oh, most rare and immaculate specimen of female loyalty and virtue, I know thee well !”

“Man !” answered the countess, springing from her knee, and standing before him with a mien and countenance of

such majestic dignity, that for a brief moment it awed even him, and her bewildered son gazed at her with emotions of awe, struggling with surprise.

"Ha! faithless minion, thou bravest it well," continued Buchan, determined on evincing no faltering in his purpose, "but thou bravest it in vain; dishonoured thou art and hast been, aye, from the time thy minion Robert visited thee in Buchan Tower, and lingered with thee the months he had disappeared from Edward's court. Would Isabella of Buchan have rendered homage to any other bold usurper, save her minion Robert? Would the murder of a Comyn have passed unavenged by her, had the murderer been other than her gallant Bruce? Would Isabella of Buchan be here, the only female in the Bruce's train—for I know that he is with thee—were loyalty and patriotism her only motive? Woman, I know thee! I know that thou didst love him, ere that false hand and falser heart were given to me; thy lips spoke perfidy when they avowed allegiance at the altar; and shall I have mercy on thy son, for such as thee? Mercy! ha, have I silenced thy eloquence now?"

"Silenced, false, blasphemous villain!" vociferated Alan, every other feeling lost in the whirlwind of passion, and springing on the earl, with his drawn sword. "'Tis thou who art the false and faithless—thou who art lost to every feeling of honour and of truth. Thy words are false as hell, from whence they spring!"

"Alan, by the love thou bearest me, I charge thee put up thy sword—it is thy father!" exclaimed the countess, commandingly, and speaking the last word in a tone that thrilled to the boy's heart. He checked himself in his full career; he snapped his drawn sword in twain, he cast it passionately from him, and uttering, convulsively, "Oh God, oh God, my father!" flung himself in agony on the ground. With arms folded, and the smile of a demon on his lip, the earl had waited his attack, but there was disappointment within, for his foul charge had failed in its intended effect. Prouder, colder, more commandingly erect had become the mien of the countess as he spoke, till she even appeared to increase in stature; her flashing eyes had never moved from his face, till his fell beneath them; her lip had curled, his cheek had flushed; powerful indeed became the contrast between the accused and the accuser.

"Arise, my son," she said, "arise and look upon thy mother; her brow even as her heart is unstained with shame; she fears not to meet the glance of her child. Look up, my boy; I speak these words to *thee*, not to that bold, bad man, who hath dared unite the name of a daughter of Fife with shame. He hath no word either of exculpation, denial, or assent from me. But to thee, my child, my young, my innocent child, thee, whose ear, when removed from me, they may strive to poison with false tales, woven with such skill that hadst thou not thy mother's word, should win thee to belief—to thee, I say, look on me, Alan—is this a brow of guilt?"

"No, no, no, I will not look on thee, my mother! I need not to gaze on thee to know the horrid falsity of the charge," answered Alan, flinging his arms passionately around his mother. "Did I never see thee more, never list that voice again, and did all the fiends of hell come around me with their lies, I would not hear, much less believe such charge. No, no! oh God, 'tis my father speaks it! Father—and my hand is powerless to avenge."

"I need not vengeance, my beloved; grieve not, weep not that thy hand is chained, and may not defend thy mother's stainless name; I need it not. My heart is known unto my God, my innocence to thee; His blessing rest with thee, my beautiful, and give thee strength for all thou mayest endure."

She bent down to kiss his brow, which was damp with the dew of intense anguish. He started up, he gave one long look on her calm and noble face, and then he flung himself in her arms, and sobbed like a child on her bosom. It was a fearful moment for that woman heart; had she been alone with her child, both nerve and spirit must have given way, but fortunately perhaps for the preservation of her fortitude, the Earl of Buchan was still the witness of that scene, triumphing in the sufferings he had caused. The countess did indeed fold her boy convulsively to her breast, but she did not bend her head on his, as Nature prompted; it was still erect; her mien majestic still, and but a slight quivering in her beautiful lip betrayed emotion.

"Be firm; be thy noble self," she said. "Forget not thou art a knight and soldier amid the patriots of Scotland. And now awhile, farewell."

She extricated herself with some difficulty from his embrace; she paused not to gaze again upon the posture of overwhelming despondency in which he had sunk, but with a step quick and firm advanced to the door.

"Whither goest thou, madam?" demanded the earl, fiercely. "Bold as thou art, it is well to know thou art a prisoner, accused of high treason against King Edward."

"I need not your lordship's voice to give me such information," she answered, proudly. "Methinks these armed followers are all-sufficient evidence. Guard me, aye, confine me with fetters an thou wilt, but in thy presence thou canst not force me to abide."

"Bid a last farewell to thy son, then, proud minion," he replied, with fiendish malignity; "for an ye part now, it is for ever. Ye see him not again."

"Then be it so," she rejoined; "we shall meet where falsehood and malignant hate can never harm us more," and with a gesture of dignity, more irritating to the earl than the fiercest demonstration of passion, she passed the threshold. A sign from Buchan surrounded her with guards, and by them she was conducted to a smaller apartment, which was first carefully examined as to any concealed means of escape, and then she was left alone, a strong guard stationed at the door.

The first few minutes after the disappearance of the countess were passed by her husband in rapidly striding up and down the room; by her son, in the same posture of mute and motionless anguish in which she had left him. There is no need to define that suffering; his peculiar situation is all-sufficient to explain it. Hurriedly securing the door from all intruders, the earl at length approached his son.

"Wouldst thou be free?" he said, abruptly. "Methinks thou art young enough still to love liberty better than chains, and perchance death. Speak, I tell thee; wouldst thou be free?"

"Free!" answered Alan, raising his head, with flashing eye and burning cheek: "would I be free? Ask of the chained lion, the caged bird, and they will tell thee the green wood and forest glade are better, dearer, even though the chain were gemmed, the prison gilded. Would I be free? Thou knowest that I would."

"Swear, then, that thou wilt quit Scotland, and vow fealty to Edward; that never more will thy sword be raised, save against the contemned and hated Bruce. Be faithful but to me and to King Edward, and thou shalt be free."

"Never!" answered Alan, proudly. "Earl of Buchan, I accept no conditions with my freedom; I will not be free, if only on this base condition. Turn recreant and traitor to my country and my king! resign the precious privilege of *dying*, if I may not *live*, for Scotland—I tell thee, never! Urge me no more."

"Nay, thou art but a boy, a foolish boy," continued the earl, struggling to speak persuadingly, "incapable of judging that which is right and best. I tell thee, I will give thee not freedom alone, but honour, station, wealth; I will acknowledge thee as my well-beloved son and heir; I will forget all that is past; nay, not e'en thy will or actions will I restrain; I will bind thee by no vow; thou shalt take no part with Edward; I will interfere not with thy peculiar politics; e'en what thou wilt thou shalt do, aye, and have—and all this but on one condition, so slight and simple that thou art worse than fool an thou refuseth."

"Speak on," muttered Alan, without raising his head. "I hear."

"Give me but information of the movements of him thou callest king," replied Buchan, in a low yet emphatically distinct voice; "give me but a hint as to where we may meet him in combat—in all honourable and knightly combat, thou knowest that I mean—give me but information such as this, and thou art free, unshackled, in condition as in limb."

"In other words, *betray him*," replied Alan, starting up. "Purchase my freedom with the price of his! mine, of nothing worth, aye, less than nothing, redeemed by his! Oh, shame, shame on thee, my lord! Well mayest thou offer me freedom of action as in will on such condition. Of little heed to Edward were the resistance of all Scotland, were Robert in his power. Honour, station, wealth!—oh, knowest thou the human heart so little as to believe these can exist with black treachery and fell remorse? Once and for ever, I tell thee thine offers are in vain. Were death in one scale, and free, unshackled liberty in the other, and thou badest me choose between, I would not so stain my

soul. Death, death itself were welcome, aye, worse than death—confinement, chains. I would hug them to my heart as precious boons, rather than live and walk the earth a traitor."

"Beware!" muttered the earl, "tempt me not too far, rash boy. I would not do thee ill; I would have pity on thy erring youth, remembering the evil counsels, the base heart which hath guided thee."

"Do thou beware!" retorted Alan, fiercely. "Speak not such foul words to me. Father, as I know thou art in blood, there are ties far stronger which bind me to my mother—ties, neglect, forgetfulness, indifference as thine can never know. Pity, aye, mercy's self, I scorn them, for I need them not."

"Ha! sayest thou so; then I swear thou shalt not have them!" exclaimed the earl, rage again obtaining the ascendant. "I would have saved thee; I would have given thee freedom, though I needed not the condition that I offered. Thinkest thou I do not know that the traitor Bruce and his followers will return hither, and fall into the net prepared? thinkest thou I know not he is with thee, aye, that he would not have left his patriot countess thus slightly guarded, and he hoped not to return himself? He cannot escape me—the murder of Sir John Comyn will be avenged."

"He shall, he will escape thee, proud earl," undauntedly returned Alan. "The saviour of his wretched country will not be forced to bow before such as thee; he will be saved out of the net prepared—harassed, chased, encompassed as he is. I tell thee, Earl of Buchan, he will escape thee yet."

"Then, by heaven, thy head shall fall for his!" fiercely replied the earl. "If he return not, he has been forewarned, prepared, and I, fool as I was, have thought not of this danger. Look to it, proud boy, if the Bruce return not forty-eight hours hence, and thou art still silent, thou diest."

He held up his clenched hand in a threatening attitude, but Alan neither moved nor spoke, firmly returning the earl's infuriated gaze till the door closed on his father's retreating form. He heard the bolts drawn, the heavy tramp of the guard, and then he threw himself on the couch, and buried his face in his hands.

CHAPTER XV.

WHILE these fearful scenes were passing in the hunting-lodge, Malcolm, the young page already mentioned, had contrived to elude the vigilance of the earl's numerous followers, and reach the brow of the hollow in perfect safety. Endowed with a sense and spirit above his years, and inspired by his devoted attachment to the countess and Sir Alan, the boy did not merely think of his own personal security, and of the simple act of warning the king against the treachery which awaited his return, but, with an eye and mind well practised in intelligent observation, he scanned the numbers, character, and peculiar situation of the foes which had so unexpectedly come upon them. Being peculiarly small and light in figure, and completely clothed in a dark green tunic and hose, which was scarcely discernible from the trees and shrubs around, he stole in and out every brake and hollow, clambering lightly and noiselessly over crags, hanging like a broken branch from stunted trees, leaping with the elasticity of a youthful fawn over stream and shrub, and thus obtained a true and exact idea of the matter he desired. The boy's heart did indeed sink as he felt rescue would be utterly impossible ; that in one direction the English force extended nearly a mile, guarding every avenue, every hollow in the forest, till it seemed next to impossible King Robert could escape, even if forewarned. Wherever he turned his steps the enemy appeared to lurk, but he wavered not in his purpose. Aware of the direction which the king would take in returning, Malcolm slackened not his speed until some three hours after he had quitted the hollow, and he stood before his sovereign well-nigh too exhausted for the utterance of his tale.

The first impulse of the king and his true-hearted followers was to dare all danger, and rescue the countess and her brave son at the expense of their lives ; but Malcolm, flinging himself at the feet of Robert, adjured him, in the name of the countess, to remember and act upon the vow he had so solemnly pledged at parting. He earnestly and emphatically repeated the last injunctions of his lady, her deep anguish that the king, the saviour of Scotland, should

hazard all for her and her child—better they should die than Robert; but these entreaties were but anguish to the noble spirit who heard, aye, and felt their truth, though abide by them he could not. Again and again he questioned and cross-questioned as to their numbers and their strength, but Malcolm never wavered from his first account; clearly and concisely he gave every required information, and with bleeding hearts that little band of patriots felt they dared not hope to rescue and to conquer. Yet tacitly to assent to necessity, to retreat without one blow, to leave their faithful companions to death, without one stroke for vengeance at least, if not for relief, this should not be.

“We will see with our own eyes, hear with our own ears, at least, my friends,” King Robert said. “Is there one among ye would retreat, from the narrative of a child, true as it may be? Remember the pass in Argyle; if necessary, your sovereign can protect your retreat now as then; and we shall at least feel we have struggled to rescue, striven for the mastery, even if it be in vain. Were my death, aye, the death of Scotland the forfeit, I could not so stain my knightly fame by such retreat. Let but the morning dawn, and we will ourselves mark the strength of our foes.”

There was not one dissenting voice, rash as his determination might appear. The extraordinary skill and courage of their sovereign, displayed in so many instances during their perilous wanderings, were too fresh in their memories to permit of one doubt, one fear, even had he led them on to certain death. To throw themselves from their tired chargers, to give them food, to lie down themselves for a brief repose on the turf, that they might be strengthened and cheered for the work of the morning, all this did not occupy much time; and if their slumbers were brief and troubled, it did not prevent their rising with alacrity at the first peep of day to polish their arms, look to the sharpening of their swords and spears, share the rude huntsman’s meal, and mount and ride with the first signal of their king.

But bold and brave as were these true-hearted men, successful as, comparatively speaking, they were in the numberless skirmishes which took place that day, darkness overtook them, with increase of glory indeed, but no nearer

the accomplishment of their object than they had been in the morning.

With bitter sorrow King Robert had perceived the full confirmation of the page's words. The early close of the night attendant on the autumn season was also unfavourable to his views ; the events of the day had fully convinced him that many an ambush was set in his path, that his personal safety was wholly incompatible with a night attack, and therefore he was compelled to remain on the defensive in one spot, which was fortunately barricaded and concealed by Nature, during the many long and weary hours forming an October night. Yet still the following day beheld him struggling on, in the face alike of disappointment, defeat, and danger the most imminent ; still seeking the same object, still hoping against hope, and retreating only because the welfare of his country, of her unfortunate children, depended upon him ; bands more and more numerous pressed upon him, coming from every side, that scarcely was one skilfully eluded ere he had to struggle against another. Nothing but the most consummate skill, the most patient courage, and coolest address could have extricated him from the fearful dangers which encompassed him. Again did his followers believe he bore a charmed life, for not only did he deal destruction, unhurt himself, but after three days' almost incessant fighting and fatigue, he had brought them to a place of safety, with but the loss of five-and-twenty men.

But though painfully conscious that further efforts for the rescue of his friends were completely useless, King Robert could not rest satisfied without some more accurate knowledge of their fate, and after some hurried yet anxious consultation, Sir James Douglas, with that daring which so marked his simplest action, declared that at all risks he would seek some tidings that would end their anxiety. In the disguise of a peasant he would be secure from all discovery, he said ; and he had not the slightest fear as to the success of the adventure. Five others started up as he spoke, entreating permission to take the same disguise and accompany him. It was granted ; King Robert advising them, however, to adopt a diversity of costume, and keep each one apart as they approached inhabited districts, as their numbers might excite suspicion,

even though the actual disguise was complete. With arms concealed beneath their various disguises, they departed that same evening, engaging to meet the king at the base of Ben-Curchan, some miles more south than their present trysting. It was an anxious parting, and yet more when they were actually gone ; for the high spirit and vein of humour which characterised the young Lord Douglas had power to cheer his friends even in the most painful moments. King Robert, indeed, exerted himself, but this last stroke had been a heavy one ; knowing so well the character of Edward, he trembled both for the countess and her noble son, perhaps less for the latter than the former, for he hoped and believed the Earl of Buchan, if indeed he were their captor, would at least have some mercy on his son, but for the countess he knew that there was no hope. The character, the sentiments of the earl had been noticed by the Bruce when both were at the court of Edward, and he felt and knew that any excuse to rid him of a wife whose virtues were obnoxious to him would be acted on with joy. And here, perhaps, it may be well to say a few words as to the real nature of King Robert's sentiments towards Isabella of Buchan, as from the anxiety her detention occasioned they may be so easily misunderstood.

We have performed our task but ill if our readers have imagined aught but the most purely noble, most chivalric sentiments actuated the heart of the king. Whatever might have been the nature of those sentiments in earlier days, since his marriage with the daughter of the Earl of Mar they had never entered his soul.

He had always believed the Lady Isabella's union with Lord John Comyn was one of choice, not of necessity, nor did his visit to her after the battle of Falkirk recall any former feeling. His mind had been under the heavy pressure of that self-reproach which the impressive words of Wallace had first awakened ; the wretched state of his country, the tyranny of Edward, occupied the mind of the man in which the emotions of the boy had merged. He was, too, a husband and a father ; and he was, as his fond wife so trustingly believed, too nobly honourable to entertain one thought to her dishonour. He looked on Isabella of Buchan as one indeed demanding his utmost esteem and gratitude, his most faithful friendship, and he secretly vowed that she

should have it; but these emotions took not their colouring from the past, they were excited simply by her high-minded devotion to the cause of her country, her unshrinking patriotism, her noble qualities, alike as a mother, subject, friend. He felt but as one noble spirit ever feels for a kindred essence, heightened perhaps by the dissimilarity of sex, but aught of love, even in its faintest shadow, aught of dishonourable feelings towards her or his own wife never entered his wildest dream. It was the recollection of her unwavering loyalty, of the supporting kindness she had ever shown his queen, which occasioned his bitter sorrow at her detention by the foe; it was the dread that the cruel wrath of Edward would indeed condemn her to death for the active part she had taken in his coronation; the conviction, so agonizing to a mind like his, that he had no power to rescue and avenge; the fearful foreboding that thus would all his faithful friends fall from him—this, only this, would be the reward of all who served and loved him; and even while still, with undaunted firmness, cheering the spirits of his adherents, speaking hope to them, his own inward soul was tortured with doubts as to the wisdom of his resistance, lingering regrets for the fate of those of his friends already lost to him, and painful fears for the final doom of those who yet remained.

It was in such moments of despondency that remorse, too, ever gained dominion, and heightened his inward struggles. Robert's hand was not framed for blood; his whole soul revolted from the bitter remembrance of that fatal act of passion which had stained his first rising. He would have given worlds, if he had had them, to have recalled that deed. Busy fancy represented a hundred ways of punishing treachery other than that which his fury had adopted; and this remembrance ever increased the anguish with which he regarded the fate of his friends. His lot was indeed as yet one of unexampled suffering, borne by heroism as great as unequalled; but the lustre of the latter too frequently dazzles the mind, and prevents the full meed of glory being obtained. His heroism is known to all, his sufferings but to a few; but perhaps it was the latter yet more than the former which gave to Scotland the glory and honour she acquired in his reign. Heroism is scarce separable from ambition, but to mere ambition the voice of

suffering is seldom heard. Heroism dazzles the crowd, suffering purifies the man. If Robert the Bruce were ambitious, the passion in him assumed a nobler and better form ; yet we can scarcely call that ambition which sought but the delivery of Scotland from chains, but the regaining an ancient heritage, and sought no more. It was patriotism hallowed by suffering, purified by adversity ; patriotism the noblest, purest which ever entered the heart of man.

King Robert and his handful of followers not only reached their trysting-place themselves, but were joined by the queen, and many of her female companions and their attendant warriors, ere Lord James of Douglas returned ; three of his companions had straggled in, one by one, with various accounts, but none so satisfactory as the king desired, and he believed with justice, that Douglas lingered to bring, if not satisfactory (for that, alas ! could not be) yet accurate intelligence. If aught could have comforted Agnes in these moments of agonized suspense, it would have been not alone the redoubled affection of her Nigel, but the soothing kindness, the love and sympathy of a father, which was lavished on her by King Robert ; nay, each of those rude warriors softened in address and tone, as they looked on and spoke to that fair, fragile being, whom they feared now stood alone. She did not weep when other eyes than those of Nigel, or the Lady Campbell, or the gentle Isoline were on her, but that deadly pallor, that quivering lip, and heavy eye spoke all that she endured.

A large cavern, divided by Nature into many compartments, was now the temporary shelter of the king and his friends. It was situated at the base of Ben-Cruchan, which, though at the entrance of the territories of Lorn, was now comparatively secure, the foe imagining the Bruce still amidst the mountains of Aberdeenshire.

The evening meal was spread ; a huge fire blazing in the stony cavity removed all appearance of damp or discomfort, and shed a warm ruddy light on the groups within. It was a rude home for the King of Scotland and his court, yet neither murmuring nor despondency was marked on the bold brows of the warriors, or the gentler and paler features of their faithful companions ; their frames, indeed, showed the effect of wandering and anxiety ; many an eye which

had been bright was sunken, many a blooming cheek was paled ; but the lip yet smiled, the voice had yet its gleesome tones to soothe and cheer their warrior friends ; the eager wish to prepare the couch and dress the simple meal, to perform those many little offices of love and kindness so peculiarly a woman's, and engaged in with a zest, a skill which was intuitive, for there had been a time, and one not far distant, when those highborn females little dreamed such household deeds would be their occupation.

Brightly and beautifully shone forth conjugal and filial love in those wandering hours ; the wife, the child, the sister bound themselves yet closer to the warrior husband, father, brother, which claimed them his. Yet sweet, most sweet as were those acts of love, there were anxious and loving hearts which felt that soon, too soon, they must part from them, they must persuade those gentle ones to accede to a temporary separation—they could not, they would not expose them to the snows and killing frosts of a Scottish winter.

Anxiety, deep anxiety was on the heart of King Robert, becoming more painful with each glance he fixed on Agnes, who was sitting apart with Nigel, her aching head resting on his shoulder, but he strove to return the caresses of his daughter, to repay with fond smiles the exertions of his wife. Sir Niel Campbell (who, after many painful trials, had rejoined the king) and others strove to disperse the silently gathering gloom by jest and song, till the cavern walls re-echoed with their soldier mirth. Harshly and mournfully it fell on the ear and heart of the maiden of Buchan, but she would not have it stilled.

“No no ; do thou speak to me, Nigel, and I shall only list to thee. Why should the noble efforts of these brave men—for I know even to them mirth is now an effort—be chilled and checked, because my sick heart beats not in unison ? Oh, when will Lord James return ?”

Nigel sought to soothe, to speak hope, but though his words fell like balm on the bleeding heart he held to his, it was the rich melody of their voice, not the matter of their meaning.

The hour of rest was fast approaching, when the well-known signal was heard without, and the young Lord Douglas, with his two companions, were hastily and eagerly admitted within the cave. Their looks denoted great fatigue,

and the eager eyes which scanned their countenances read little to hope, yet much, alas ! to fear.

"Thou hast so far succeeded as to obtain the intelligence we need," was the king's instant greeting, as he released his favourite young follower from his embrace ; "that I can read, but farther, I fear me, thou hast little to communicate which we shall love to hear."

"My tidings are ill indeed, your highness ; aggravated and most undreamed-of ill. But, perchance," and the young man hesitated, for his eye caught the pallid face of Agnes, who had irresistibly drawn closer to the circle about the king, and fixed her eyes on him with an expression almost wild in its agony, "perchance they had better first meet your grace's private ear."

"No, no !" reiterated Agnes, springing forward, and clinging convulsively to his arm. "It is only me thou fearest, I know ; I know thou wouldst spare me, but do not, do not. I can bear all, everything, save this horrible suspense ; speak out, let me but know all, and then I can teach my soul to bear it. Oh, do not hesitate, do not pause ; in mercy, tell me—oh, tell me all !"

Thus adjured, but feeling most painfully the suffering his tale would produce, Douglas struggled with his own emotion, and repeated all the information he had obtained. Guardedly as he spoke, evidently as he endeavoured to prepare the mind of Agnes, and thus soften its woe, his tale was yet such as to harrow up the hearts of all his hearers, how much more the frail and gentle being to whom it more immediately related ; yet she stood calm, pale, indeed, and quivering, but with a desperate effort conquering the weakness of her nature, and bearing that deep woe as the daughter of her mother, the betrothed of Nigel Bruce.

The young lord's information was simply this. On nearing the hunting-lodge, which was his first object, he found it very nearly deserted, but a few stragglers, amounting perhaps to fifty in number of the followers of Buchan, remaining behind, with orders to follow their master to Dunkeld without delay. Mingling with these as a countryman of the more northern counties, eager to obtain every species of intelligence respecting the movements of the English and the hunted Bruce, whom he pretended to condemn and vilify after the fashion of the Anglo-Scots, and feeling perfectly

secure not only in the disguise he had assumed, but in the peculiar accent and intonation of the north-country peasant, which he could assume at pleasure, he made himself a welcome guest, and with scarcely any trouble received much of the information he desired. He was told of the first capture and rescue of the Countess of Buchan; that it was through one of the men left for dead on the scene of the skirmish the earl had received such exact information concerning the movements and intended destination of the Bruce; that immediately on receiving this intelligence he had gathered all his force, amounting to five hundred men, and dividing them into different bands, sent skilful guides with each, and was thus enabled to surround the lodge, and command five different avenues of the forest, without interruption or discovery. He learned, too, that a stormy interview had taken place between the earl, his wife, and son, the particulars of which, however, had not transpired; that the earl's rage had been terrific when he found the night passed, and the Bruce had not fallen into the snare laid for him; and he had sworn a fearful oath, that if the countess would not betray him into his power, her son should die; that both mother and son had stood this awful trial without shrinking, that no word either to betray their king or implore life and mercy had been wrung from them. Incensed beyond all measure, Buchan had sent on the countess with a numerous guard, his men believed, either to Dunkeld or Perth, in both of which towns there was a strong garrison of English, and lingered yet another day and night in the hope of dragging some intelligence from the lips of Alan, or persuading him into acting the spy upon the actions and movements of the Bruce. He succeeded in neither; and the men continued to state, with shuddering horror, which even their rude natures could not suppress, that they believed the son had actually fallen a victim to his father's rage—that he had actually been murdered. Numerous reports to that effect had been circulated on all sides, and though they had watched narrowly, they had seen nothing to contradict it. The body of the unfortunate boy had been cast into a deep well, heaps of rubbish flung over it, and the well built up. This they knew as a positive certainty, for they had seen it.

Douglas heard this tale with an intensity of horror, of loathing, which at first deprived him almost of every other

feeling; but when he could withdraw himself from the horrible idea, a species of disbelief took possession of him. It was impossible such utter depravity, such fearful insensibility to the claims of nature could exist in the breast of any man; it was a tale forged to inflict fresh agony on the mother's heart, and he determined on discovering, if possible, the truth. He pretended entirely to disbelieve it; declared it was not possible; that the earl had practised on their credulity, and would laugh at them afterwards; and contrived so well, that three or four declared he should be convinced with his own eyes, and set about pulling down the slight brickwork which covered the well. 'This was what Douglas wanted, and he eagerly lent them a helping hand.

A body there was indeed, in form and in clothing so exactly that of the unhappy Alan, that, even though the face was so marred it could not be recognised, the young earl could doubt no longer; the young, the brave, the beautiful and true had fallen a victim to his own patriot loyalty, and by a father's hand. The deep suffering this certainty occasioned was regarded by his companions as sulkiness for having been proved wrong in his judgment; they jeered and laughed at him accordingly, and harshly as these sounds reverberated in his heart, they were welcome, as enabling him still more easily to continue his disguise.

He accompanied them to Dunkeld, and found the earl had proceeded with his wife as prisoner to the castle of Stirling, there to deliver her over to the Earl of Hereford, through whom to be sent on to Edward. Determined on seeing her, if possible, Douglas resolved on daring the danger, and venturing even to the very stronghold of his foes. The horror which this unnatural act of the earl had excited in the minds of his men, he found had extended even over those in Dunkeld, and through them he learned that, directly on reaching the town, the earl had sought the countess, brutally communicated the death of her son, and placed in her hands the raven curls as all which remained of him, some of which were dabbled in blood; that she had remained apparently unmoved while in his presence, but the moment he left her had sunk into a succession of the most fearful fainting fits, in one of which she had been removed to Stirling.

Withdrawing himself from his companions, under pretence of returning to his home in the north, having, he said, loitered too long, Douglas concealed himself for some days in the abbey of Scone, the holy inmates of which still retained their loyalty and patriotism, notwithstanding their revered abbot, unable to remain longer inactive, had donned the warrior's dress, and departed to join and fight with his king. Assuming the cowl and robes of one of the lay brothers, and removing the red wig and beard he had adopted with his former costume, the young lord took the staff in his hand, and with difficulty bringing his hasty pace to a level with the sober step and grave demeanour of a reverend monk, reached Stirling just as the cavalcade, with the litter intended for the captive countess, had assembled before the castle gate. Agitated almost beyond the power of control, Douglas made his way through the gathering crowds, and stood unquestioned close beside the litter. He did not wait long. Respectfully supported by the Earl of Hereford himself, the Countess of Buchan, with a firm, unfaltering step, approached the litter. The hood was thrown back, and Douglas could read the effects of withering agony on the marble stillness of those beautiful features, though to all else they spoke but firm and calm resolve; there was not a vestige of colour on cheek or lip or brow; and though her figure was as commanding, as majestic as heretofore, there was a fearful attenuation about it, speaking volumes to Lord James's heart. Hereford placed her in the litter, and with a respectful salutation, turned away to give some necessary orders to his men. Bold in his disguise, Douglas bent over the countess, and spoke in a low, feigned voice those words of comfort and of peace suited to his assumed character, but feigned as it was, the countess recognised him on that instant; a convulsive shudder passed through her every limb, contracting her features with very agony.

"My child—my Alan!" she whispered, harrowing his very soul beneath that voice's thrilling woe. "Douglas, hast thou heard?—yes, yes; I can read it in thine awe-struck face. This, this is all I have left of him," and she partly drew from her bosom the clustering ringlets he recognised at once; "yet, wherefore should I mourn him, he is happy. Bid his memory be honoured among ye, and oh,

tell the sovereign for whom he fell, better a death like this than treachery and shame."

She had paused as fearing observation, but perceiving the attention of all more fixed on the glittering cavalcade than on herself, she placed one of those glossy curls in the young earl's hand, and continued—

"Give this to my poor Agnes, with her mother's blessing, and bid her take comfort, bid her not weep and mourn for me. A prison, even death is preferable now to life, for she is cared for. I trust her to Sir Nigel's love; I know that he will tend her as a brother till a happier hour makes her all his own. Commend me to my sovereign, and tell him, might I choose my path again, despite its anguish, 'twould be that which I have trod. And now farewell, young lord, I bless thee for this meeting."

"*Dominus vobiscum mea filia; et vale,*" responded the supposed monk, in a loud voice, for he had only time to assure the countess by a look of deep sympathy of his willingness to execute her simplest wish, and hide the ringlet in his bosom, ere Hereford turned towards him, with a gaze of stern inquiry. Ably concealing alike his emotion and the expression of his countenance, Douglas evaded discovery, and even obtained permission to follow the litter to the environs of the town. He did so, but the countess addressed him not again; and it was with a heart-sinking despondency he had turned to the mountains, when the cavalcade disappeared from his view. He retained his monkish garb till he entered the mountain district, where he fell in with his two companions, and they proceeded, as we have seen, to the quarters of their king.

A pause of horror followed his narrative, told more forcibly and briefly by the lips of Douglas than through the cooler medium of the historian's pen. Stunned, overwhelmed, as if incapable of movement or speech, though sense remained, Agnes stood insensible, even to the voice of Nigel, whose soothing accents strove to whisper peace; but when Douglas placed in her cold hand the raven curls she knew so well, when tenderly yet earnestly he repeated her mother's words, the poor girl repeatedly pressed the hair to her parched lips, and laid it in her bosom; and then perceiving the sad and anxious face of her beloved, she passed her hand hurriedly over her brow, and burying her

head on his breast, sense was preserved by an agony of tears.

It was long, long ere this aggravated wretchedness was calmed, though the love of many, the devotion of one were ever round her to strengthen and console. Sympathy, the most heartfelt, reigned in every bosom. Of the many misfortunes which had befallen this patriot band, this seemed if not really the severest, more fraught with horror than any which had come before; the youth, the gallant bearing, the endearing qualities of the heir of Buchan stood forth with vivid clearness in the memories of all, and there were times when they felt it could not be, it was too fearful; and then again, the too certain evidence of the fact, witnessed as it had been by one of such tried truth as James of Douglas, brought conviction too clearly home, and the sternest warrior, who would have faced his own captivity and death unmoved, felt no shame in the dimness which gathered in his eye for the fearful fate of the murdered boy.

In King Robert's breast these emotions obtained yet more powerful dominion; again did remorse distract him, and there were moments of darkness, when his spirit questioned the justice of the Creator. Why was not his crime visited on his own head? Why did the guiltless and unstained fall thus around him, and he remained unharmed? and it needed all the eloquence of Nigel, the pious reasonings of the Abbot of Scone, to convince him that, dark and inscrutable as the decrees of Omnipotence sometimes seemed, in his case they were as clear as the wisdom from which they sprung. By chastisement he was purified; he was not yet fit to receive the reward of the righteous waiting on death. Destined to be the saviour of his unhappy country, the remorse which bowed down his naturally haughty spirit was more acceptable in the sight of his God, more beneficial to his own soul, than the one act of devotedness included in a brave man's death. Robert struggled with his despondency, with his soul's deep grief, known as it was but to himself, his confessor, and his young brother; he felt its encouragement would unnerve him for his destined task. Other imperative matters now pressed round him, and by presenting fresh and increased danger, roused his energies once more to their wonted action.

The winter had set in with unexampled severity, overwhelming snow-storms filled up the rude paths of the mountains, till egress and ingress appeared impossible. The Earl of Athol himself, who had been the inseparable companion of the Bruce in all his wanderings, now spoke of retiring, and passing the winter within stone walls, urging his sovereign with earnest eloquence to take refuge in Ireland till the spring, when they would reassemble under arms, and perhaps take the tyrant Edward once more by surprise.

Bruce knew the veteran nobleman too well to attribute this advice to any motive save deep interest in his safety. He saw, too, that it was utterly impossible for them to remain as they then were, without serious evils alike to his female and male companions; the common soldiers, steady and firm as they still continued in loyalty, yet were continually dispersing, promising to reassemble in the spring, but declaring that it was useless to think of struggling against the English, when the very elements were at war against them. With a sad foreboding, Robert saw, and communicated to his devoted wife the necessity of their separation. He felt that it was right and best, and therefore he resisted all her tearful entreaties still to linger by his side; her child was suffering, for her tender years could not bear up against the cold and the want of proper nourishment, and yet even that claim seemed less to the mother's heart than the vision of her husband enduring increase of hardship alone. Her acquiescence was indeed at length obtained, but dimmed by many very bitter tears.

A hasty consultation with his few remaining friends speedily decided the Bruce's plans. The castle of Kildrummie, a strong fortress situated at the head of the Don, in Aberdeenshire, yet remained to him, and thither, under the escort of his brother Nigel and three hundred men, the king determined to send his wife and child, and the other ladies of his court. Himself, his three brothers, Edward, Alexander, and Thomas, Douglas, Sir Niel Campbell, and his remaining two hundred followers, resolved on cautiously making their way southward across Loch Lomond, and proceed thence to the coast of Ireland, there to await the spring. In pursuance of this plan, Sir Niel Campbell was despatched without delay to conciliate Angus, Lord of

the Isles, to whom Cantire then belonged. Knowing he was unfriendly to his near neighbours, the Lords of Lorn, the king trusted he should find in him a powerful ally. To appeal yet more strongly to the chivalric hospitality which characterised the chieftain, Sir Niel consented that his wife and daughter Isoline should accompany him. Lady Campbell had too lately undergone the grief and anxiety attendant on the supposed loss of her husband to consent to another parting. Even the king, her brother, sought not to dissuade her; but all persuasions to induce Agnes to accompany them were vain; bitter as the pang of separation was to her already aching heart—for Lady Campbell and Isoline were both most dear to her—she steadily resolved to remain with the queen and her attendants, and thus share the fate of her betrothed.

“Did not my mother commend me to thy care? Did she not bid thee tend me as a brother until happier hours, and shall I seek other guardianship than thine, my Nigel?” were her whispered words, and Nigel could not answer them. So pure, so unselfish was her love, that though he felt his happiness would have departed with her presence, could he have commanded words he would have implored her to seek the hospitality of the Lord of the Isles as a securer home than Kildrummie. Those forebodings already alluded to had returned with darker weight from the hour his separation from his brother was resolved on. He evinced no sign of his inward thoughts, he uttered no word of dissent, for the trust reposed in him by his sovereign was indeed as precious as it was honourable; but there was a mournful expression on his beautiful countenance—when unobserved, it would rest upon his brother—that Agnes could not define, although it filled her spirit with incomprehensible alarm, and urged her yet more to abide by his side.

The dreaded day arrived at length, and agonized was indeed that parting. Cheerfully the king looked, and hopefully he spoke, but it had no power to calm the overwhelming tide of sorrow in which his wife clung to his embrace. Again and again she returned to that faithful heart which bore so fondly, so forbearingly, with all her faults and weaknesses, and Margory, although she could not comprehend the extent of sorrow experienced by her mother, wept bitterly at her side. Nor were they the only sufferers.

Some indeed were fortunate enough to have relatives amid the band which accompanied them to Kildrummie, but by far the greater number clung to the necks of brothers, fathers, husbands, whose faithful and loving companions they had been so long—clung to them and wept, as if a long dim vista of sorrow and separation stretched before them. Danger, indeed, was around them, and the very fact of their being thus compelled to divide, appeared to heighten the perils, and tacitly acknowledge them as too great to be endured.

With pain and difficulty the iron-souled warriors at length tore themselves from the embrace of those they held most dear. The knights and their followers had closed round the litters, and commenced their march. No clarion sent its shrill blast on the mountain echoes, no inspiring drum reverberated through the glens—all was mournfully still; as the rudest soldier revered the grief he beheld, and shrunk from disturbing it by a sound.

King Robert stood alone, on the spot where Sir Christopher Seaton had borne from him his wife and child. His eyes still watched their litter; his thoughts still lingered with them alone; full of affection, anxiety, sadness, they were engrossed, but not defined. He was aroused by the sudden appearance of his younger brother, who, bareheaded, threw himself at his feet, and, in a voice strangely husky, murmured—

“My sovereign, my brother, bless me, oh, bless me, ere we part.”

“My blessing—the blessing of one they deem accursed; and to thee, good, noble, stainless as thou art. Nigel, Nigel, do not mock me thus,” answered the king, bitterness struggling with the deepest melancholy, as he laid his hand, which strangely trembled, on the young man’s lowered head. “Alas! bring I not evil and misery and death on all who love me? What, what may my blessing bring to thee?”

“Joy, bright joy in the hour of mirth and comfort; oh, untold-of comfort in the time of sorrow, imprisonment, death. My brother, my brother, oh, refuse it not; thou knowest not, thou canst not know how Nigel loves thee.”

Robert gazed at him till every thought, every feeling

was lost in the sudden sensation of dread lest ill should come to him ; it had overtaken one as fair in promise, as beloved, and yet younger ; and oh, if death selected the best, the loveliest, the dearest, would it next fall on him ? The thought was such absolute agony, that the previous suffering of that hour was lost before it.

“Bless thee—oh, may God in heaven bless thee, my brave, my noble Nigel!” he exclaimed, with a burst of emotion, perfectly appalling in one generally so controlled, and raising him, he strained him convulsively to his heart. “Yet why should we part ?” he added, after a long pause ; “why did I fix on thee for this office—are there not others ? Nigel, Nigel, say but the word, and thou shalt rest with me : danger, privation, exile we have borne, and may still share together. Why should I send thee from me, dearest, most beloved of all who call me brother ?”

“Why ?” answered Nigel, raising his glistening eyes from his brother’s shoulder, “why, dear Robert ? because thine eye could read my heart and trust it ; because thou knewest I would watch over those who bear thy name, who are dear to thee, even as thy noble self. Oh, do not repent thee of thy choice ; ’tis hard to bear alone danger, so long encountered hand in hand, yet as thou hast decided let it be. Thy words have soothed my yearning heart, which craved to list thy voice once more ; and now then, my noble liege and brother, farewell. Think on thy Nigel’s words ; even when misery is round thee thou shalt, thou shalt be blessed. Think on them, my Robert, and then when joy and liberty and conquest crown thee, oh, forget not Nigel.”

He threw his arms around him, imprinted a fervent kiss on his cheek, and was out of sight ere the king by sign or word could arrest his progress. One hasty bound forward Robert indeed made, but a dimness stole over his sight, and for one brief minute he sunk down on the grass, and when he lifted his head again, there were burning tears upon his cheek.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE hardships and dangers attendant on King Robert's progress southward, mingled as they were with the very spirit of romance, are so well known to every reader of Scottish history that they must be excluded from our pages, although a tale of chivalry would seem the very place for their insertion.

The life of no hero, no sovereign, no general, presents us with a parallel to the lone and dreary passage of Loch Lomond. We hear of an ancient and a modern Hannibal crossing the snowy Alps, but it was at the head of triumphant armies; it was carrying war and victory into an enemy's land, and there was glory in the danger—the glory and pride of successful ambition. But there was greater and truer heroism in the spirit which struggled on when the broad, deep waters of Loch Lomond lay between them and comparative safety; when 'mid falling snow and howling winds he cheered his drooping and exhausted followers by reading aloud a spirit-stirring romance, to which they listened enwrapt and charmed, little imagining their own situation was one of far greater peril, or more exciting romance than any which the volume so vividly described. A leaky boat, which scarcely allowed three men to cross in safety, was their only means of conveyance, and a day and night passed ere the two hundred followers of the Bruce assembled on the opposite side. The cheerful blast of his bagle, which sounded to form them in bands before him on the beach, was answered by one whose unexpected appearance occasioned such joy to the heart of the king, that the exertions both of body and mind of the last few hours were forgotten. It was the Earl of Lennox, who since the fatal battle of Methven had been numbered amongst the dead, and lamented by his royal master with grief as deep as the joy was exceeding which greeted him again. Mutual was the tale of suffering each had to relate, few and faint the hopes and prospects to communicate, but so many were the friends the patriots had lost, that the reappearance of the venerable nobleman infused a new and brighter spirit amid the almost despairing men.

That the Earl of Lennox had found a kind and hospitable home in the dominion of the Lord of the Isles, and received welcome and favour from the chieftain himself, was justly a subject of rejoicing to the fugitive king. Guided by him, the intricacies of their path were smoothed, and they reached their destination in a much shorter time than would otherwise have been the case. Sir Niel Campbell had performed his mission well, and kindness and truth so long unknown, now eagerly opened their hearths and hearts to the patriot king. Scorning alike the Scottish and English authority, Angus, Lord of the Isles, had formed an independent sovereignty, and now felt pride in receiving in his territories the only sovereign he had felt inclination to revere. The daring heroism, the unshaken spirit of the Bruce, were akin to his own wild and reckless courage, and had there been no actual claim and right in Robert's pretensions to the crown, Angus would still have declared that he, and he alone, was the sovereign worthy to assume it. All, then, of state and dignity which he could assemble round him were proffered to the king, and had there been less generosity, less chivalric honour in his character, King Robert might have passed the winter months in comparative security and comfort.

Angus indeed spoke daringly and slightly of the English force, and had his inmost soul been read, would have joyed had they ventured to attack him, that he might show his skill and bravery in resisting and defending against their united force the sovereign who had confided in his gallantry and honour; but Robert knew better than the rude chieftain the devastating warfare which characterised Edward's efforts at subjection, and his whole soul shrunk from exposing Angus and his true-hearted followers to the utter ruin which, if he were once known to be amongst them, would inevitably ensue. At once to secure his personal concealment, and yet to withdraw from Cantire without in any way offending the high spirit of the island chieftain, Bruce resolved on making the little island of Rathlin the winter refuge of himself and his two hundred followers.

Inhabited by the MacDonalds, who were of course subject to their general chief, though divided from him by the channel, Bruce was still under the generous protection of his friend, and therefore Angus could bring forward no ob-

jection to the proposal, save the miserable poverty, the many discomforts of the barren islet, and entreat with all his natural eloquence that King Robert would still remain in the peninsula. The arguments of the king, however, prevailed. A small fleet, better manned than built, was instantly made ready for his service, and Angus himself conveyed the king in his own galley to his destined residence. The aspect of the island, the savage appearance and manner of its inhabitants were indeed such as to strike despondingly and painfully on the hearts of any less inured to suffering than King Robert and his devoted adherents. To them it was welcome, for they justly felt the eye of Edward could scarcely reach them there. It was a painful alternative to warrior spirits such as theirs that the safety of their country depended on their inaction and concealment; yet as their king, their patriot king, was still amongst them, there was much, much to hope and cherish still. That their gentler friends and relatives were, they hoped and believed, in a place of safety, was a matter of rejoicing, though neither entreaty nor command could persuade the Lady Campbell and her daughter Isoline to accept the proffered hospitality of the island chieftain. It was nothing to them that they were the only females 'mid that warrior train, that many hardships were around them still. Neither Sir Niel nor the king could resist their pleadings, and ere the sun of spring had shed its influence on the heart of man as well as the hardened earth, there were many who mourned that a separation had taken place, who wished that fatigue and anxiety had still been met together.

Many weeks before King Robert retreated to the island of Rathlin, Sir Nigel Bruce had conducted his precious charge in safety to the castle of Kildrummie, whose feeble garrison gladly flung open their gates to receive them.

It was a strong fortress situated on a circular mount, overhanging the river Don, which at that point ever rushed darkly and stormily along; the mount, though not steep, was full two miles in circumference, from base to brow occupied by the castle, which was erected in that massive yet irregular form peculiar to the architecture of the middle ages. A deep, broad moat or fosse, constantly supplied by the river, defended the castle wall, which ran round the mound, irregularly indeed, for there were indentations and

sharp angles, occasioned by the uneven ground, each of which was guarded by a strong turret or tower, rising from the wall. The wall itself was some four-and-twenty feet in height, and nine in thickness, consequently the spaces between the turrets on the top of the wall formed broad level platforms, which in case of a siege were generally kept strongly guarded. Facing the east, and commanding a view of the river and adjacent country, stood the barbican gate and drawbridge, which latter was further defended by strong oaken doors and an iron portcullis, forming the great gate of the castle wall, and the principal entrance into the fortress. Two towers of immense strength, united by a narrow, dimly-lighted passage, guarded this gate, and on these depended the grate or portcullis, which was lowered or raised by internal machinery. Within the castle wall was the outer ballium or court, containing some small, low-roofed dwellings, the residence of many feudal retainers of the baron. A rude church or chapel was also within this court, holding a communication with the keep or principal part of the castle by means of a passage in the third wall, which divided the ballium from the inner court. In very large castles there were in general a second fosse, wall, gate, and towers guarding the keep, and thus making a complete division between it and the ballium, but the original owners of Kildrummie, less rich and powerful suzerains than their equals in South Britain, were probably contented with merely a stout wall to divide their own sovereign residence from their more plebeian followers. The keep itself, constructed like all other similar buildings of the age, was a massive tower, covering but a small square, and four or five stories high. There were attempts at luxury in the chambers within, but to modern taste the Norman luxury was little better than rudeness; and certainly though the cushions were soft and richly embroidered, the arras in some of the apartments, splendid specimens of needlework, and the beautifully carved and often inlaid oaken walls of others, gave evidence of both taste and talent, yet the dim light seemed to shed a gloom and heaviness over the whole range of rooms and passages, which no skill of workmanship or richness of material could remove. The windows were invariably small, and very long and narrow, and set in walls of such huge thickness, that the sun had barely power even

in his summer splendour, to penetrate the dusky panes. In this keep was the great hall of audience, and for the banquet, at the upper end of which the dais was invariably found, and dark and loathsome dungeons formed its basement.

The roof of Kildrummie keep was flatter than the generality of Norman castles, its four angles being surmounted more by the appearance than the reality of turrets; but one rose from the centre, round, and pierced by loopholes, turreted at the top, and commanding an extensive view of the adjoining country; from this tower the banner of the baron always waved, and its non-appearance excited some indignation in the breast of Nigel Bruce, for his warrior spirit had no sympathy with this timorous excuse, that did it wave at such a time it might attract the attention of the English, whereas did it elevate no symbol of defiance its garrison might pass unquestioned.

"Up with the banner of Scotland and the Bruce!" were the first commands of Sir Nigel, as he stood within the balium, surrounded by his charge and followers. "Shall we, pledged as we are to our country and king, even *seem* to stand neutral and conceal our colours, as ashamed of them? Shall this be?"

He was answered by a simultaneous rush towards the keep, and at his word the folds of the broad banner waved exultingly from the tower, its appearance hailed by a loud shout from those beneath, and by a bright and momentary gleam of sunshine flashing through the heavy clouds.

"Ha! see ye, my friends, even heaven smiles on us," exclaimed the young knight, triumphantly, and smiling cheerily on his fair friends, as with gay words and graceful action he marshalled them into the keep. It was while doing so that Agnes marked the figure of an old, yet majestic looking man, whose eyes, still bright and flashing, though his white hair denoted extreme old age, were fixed immovably on the face and form of Nigel. It was a peculiar glance, strained, eager, and yet mournful, holding her attention so fascinated that she paused in her onward way, and pointed him out to Nigel.

"I know him not, love," he said, in answer to her inquiry. "I should deem him minstrel by his garb, or seer, or both perchance, as is sometimes the case, conjoined. I will speak with him when my present grateful task is done."

But it was the next morning ere he had the opportunity of doing so, for much devolved on the young seneschal. He had to visit the outworks, the stores, the offices, to give multitudinous orders, and receive various intelligences, to review the present garrison and his own followers, and assign to each his post; and though ably aided by Sir Christopher Seaton and other of his officers, all this occupied much time. The outworks he found in excellent condition, the barbican, of massive stone, seemed well enabled to resist attack, should it be made; the machinery of the drawbridge was in good order, and enabled to be drawn up or let down at a moment's warning. The stores and granaries, which were contained in the towers on the castle wall, were very amply provided, though Nigel, taking advantage of the present peaceful temper of the country, despatched trusty messengers without delay for further supplies. That this fortress, almost the only one remaining to his brother, would remain unmolested, Nigel did not for one moment believe, but he did hope that, in case of a siege, if amply provided with stores, it might hold out till the intense cold of the season and climate would turn the besiegers from their purpose; at all events, the advancing winter would be more favourable to the besieged than the besiegers, and though the garrison was comparatively small, the place itself was of such great strength as to guarantee the indulgence of his hopes. That the original garrison were too timorous and wavering for him to place much dependence on them he readily perceived, but he trusted much to the beneficial influence which his own steady, true-hearted followers might be enabled to infuse.

Nigel was young, brave, and animated by every feeling which inspires courage and hope in the buoyant heart of youth. The gloom which had oppressed him in parting with his brother, and indeed had partially clouded his spirit during their rapid journey, vanished before the duties and responsibilities which thronged round him, now that he felt himself the guard and seneschal of the castle intrusted to his charge; now that new duties devolved on him, duties particularly dear to a young and gallant spirit like his own; duties, too, that bound him closer and closer with the gentle being in whose welfare and happiness his own were shrined. It was with a bright smile, then, and animated brow he

joined his Agnes early the following morning, in a stroll through a small woody enclosure dignified by the name of garden, which occupied part of the inner court. The old minstrel who had so attracted the attention of Agnes was there before them. He stood against a projecting buttress, his arms folded, his eyes fixed, it seemed, on vacancy, and evidently not aware he was approached till Nigel spoke.

"Good morrow, father. I thought we had been the earliest to greet this fresh and frosty air, save those on guard, yet you are before us. Nay, wherefore doff thy cap, good father? The air is somewhat too frosty for thy silvered head."

"I cannot doff it to a nobler, gentle youth," answered the old man, courteously, "save to my sovereign's self; and as his representative, I pay willing homage to his brother."

"Ha! dost thou know me, father? and was it because I am King Robert's brother thine eyes so rested on me yesternorn, mournfully, methought, as if the joy with which I hailed the gleam of sunshine smiling on our banner had little echo in thy breast."

"Not that, not that," answered the old man, tremulously; "I scarce remarked it, for my thoughts were in that future which is sometimes given me to read. I saw thee, noble youth, but 'twas not here. Dim visions come across my waking hours; it is not well to note them," and he turned away as if he might not meet those eager eyes.

"Not here! yet I was at his side, good father," and Agnes laid her fair hand on the old man's arm.

"Thou wert, thou wert, my child. Beautiful, beautiful!" he half whispered, as he laid his arm dreamily on those golden curls, and looked on her face; "yet hath sorrow touched thee, maiden. Thy morn of life hath been o'erclouded; its shadow lingers yet."

"Too truly speakest thou, father," replied Nigel, drawing Agnes closer to his heart, for tears were starting in her eyes; "yet will not love soon chase that sorrow. Thou who canst penetrate the future, seer of the Bruce's line, tell me, shall she not be mine?"

The old man looked on them both, and then his eyes became fixed on vacancy; long and painfully once or twice he passed his hand across his high, pale brow.

"Vain, vain," he said, sadly; "but one vision comes to mine aching sight, and there she seems thine own. She is

thine own—but I know not how that will be. Ask me no more ; the dream is passing. 'Tis a sad and fearful gift. Others may triumph in the power, but for me 'tis sad, 'tis very sad."

"Sad ! nay, is it not joy the anticipating joy ?" answered Nigel, with animation ; "to look on a beloved one, and mark, amid the clouds of distance, glory, and honour, and love entwining on his path ? to look through the shades of present sorrow, and discern the sunbeam afar off—is there not joy in this ?"

"Aye, gentle youth ; but now, oh, now is there aught in Scotland to whisper these bright things ? There was rejoicing, and glory, and triumph around the patriot Wallace. Scotland sprung from her sluggish sleep, and gave back her echo to his inspiring call. I looked upon the hero's beaming brow, I met the sparkle of his brilliant eye, I bowed before the native majesty of his god-like form, but there was no joy for me. Dark masses of clouds closed round the present sunshine ; the present fled like a mist before them, and they oped, and then—there was still Wallace ; but, oh ! how did I see him ? the scaffold, the cord, the mocking crowds, the steel-clad guards—all, all, even as he fell. My children ! my children ! was there joy in this ?"

There was a thrilling pathos in the old man's voice, that touched the very heart of his listeners. Agnes clung closer to the arm of her betrothed, and looked up tearfully in his face ; his cheek was very pale, and his lip slightly quivered. There was evidently a desire to speak, to utter some inquiry, but he looked on that sweet face, upturned to his, and the unspoken words died in an inarticulate murmur on his lips.

"My brother," he said, at length, and with some difficulty, though it was evident from the expression of his countenance this was not the question he had meant to ask, "my noble brother, will thy glorious struggles, thy persevering valour end in this ? No, no, it cannot be. Prophet and seer, hast thou e'er gazed on him—him, the hope, the joy, the glory of the line of Bruce ? Hast thou gazed on him, and was there no joy there ?"

"Yes !" answered the old man, starting from his posture of despondency, and raising his hands with animated fervour, while his cheek flushed, and his eyes fixed on distance sparkled with all the fire of youth. "Yes ! I have

gazed upon that face, and in present and in future it is glorious still. Thick mists had arisen round him, well-nigh concealing him within their murky folds, but still, still as a star penetrating through cloud, and mist, and space, till it sees its own bright semblance in the ocean depths, so has that brow, circled by its diadem of freedom, gleamed back upon mine aching sight, and I have seen and known there is joy for Bruce and Scotland yet !”

“Then there is joy for all true Scottish men, good father, and so will we chase all sadness from our brows and hearts,” replied Nigel, lightly. “Come, tell us of the past, and not the future, while we stroll ; thou hast traditions, hast thou not, to while away an hour ?”

“Nay, my young lord,” replied the seer, “hast thou not enough in the present, embodied as it is in this fair maiden’s dreaming eye and loving heart ? the minstrel’s harp and ancient lore are for the evening hour, not for a time and companion such as this,” and with an audible blessing he turned away, leaving them to their stroll together.

It was not, however, without an effort Nigel could take advantage of his absence, and make good use of moments so blissful to hearts that love. There was something in the old man’s mournful tone and glance when it rested upon him, that answered strangely and sadly to the spirit-voice breathing in his own bold breast. It seemed to touch that chord indefinitely, yet felt by the vibration of every nerve which followed. He roused himself, however, and ere they joined the morning meal, there was a brighter smile on the lip and heart of Agnes than had rested there for many a long day.

For a few weeks there was peace both within and without the castle of Kildrummie. The relief, the shelter which its walls afforded to the wearied and exhausted wanderers was at first felt and enjoyed alone. Many of the frailer sex were far too exhausted and disabled by a variety of sufferings, to be sensible of anything but that greater comforts than had been theirs for many painful months were now possessed ; but when their strength became partially restored, when these comforts became sufficiently familiar to admit of other thoughts, the queen’s fortitude began to waver. It was not the mere impulse of the moment which caused her to urge her accompanying her husband, on the plea of becoming more and more unworthy of his love if separated from him.

Margaret of Mar was not born for a heroine; more especially to act on such a stormy stage as Scotland. Full of kindly feeling, of affection, confidence, gentleness, one that would have drooped and died had her doom been to pass through life unloved, her yielding mind took its tone and colouring from those with whom she most intimately associated; not indeed from the rude and evil, for from those she intuitively shrunk. Beneath her husband's influence, cradled in his love, her spirit received and cherished the *reflection* of his strength, of itself, she too truly felt it had none; and consequently when that beloved one was far away, the reflection passed from her mind even as the gleam of his armour from the mirror on which it glanced, and Margaret was weak and timorous again. She had thought, and hoped, and prayed, her unfeigned admiration of Isabella of Buchan, her meek and beautiful appreciation of those qualities and candid acknowledgement that such was the character most adapted to her warrior husband, would bring more steadiness and courage to her own woman breast. Alas! the fearful fate which had overtaken the heroic countess came with such a shock to the weaker soul of Margaret, that if she had obtained any increase of courage, it was at once annihilated, and the desponding fancy entered her mind, that if evil reached one so noble, so steadfast in thought and in action, how might she hope to escape; and now, when weakened and depressed alike by bodily and mental suffering, such fancies obtained so much possession of her that she became more and more restless. The exertions of Sir Nigel and his companions, even of her own friends, failed in rousing or infusing strength. Sometimes it was vague conjectures as to the fate of her husband, the dread that he had fallen into the hands of his foes—a catastrophe which not only herself but many stronger minds imagined could scarcely be avoided. She would dwell on these fancies till suspense became intolerable; and then, if these were partially calmed, came personal fears; the belief that if attacked, the castle could not muster force enough for defence; suspicions of treachery in the garrison, and other symptoms of the wavering nature of her mind, till Sir Nigel felt too truly that if danger did come, she would not stay to meet it. Her wishes ever turned to the sanctuary of St. Duthac in the domains of the Earl of Ross, believing the sanctity of the place would

be more effectual protection than the strongest castle and bravest force. In vain Sir Nigel remonstrated, nay, assured her that the fidelity of the Lord of Ross was impugned; that he doubted his flattering overtures; that he was known to be in correspondence with England. But he spoke in vain, the queen persisted in trusting him; that he had ever been a friend of her father and brother, the Earls of Mar, and he would be faithful to her interests now. Her opinion weighed with many of the ladies of her court, even amongst those who were not affected with her fears. At such times Agnes never spoke, but there was a calm, quiet determination in her expression that convinced the Lady Seaton, who alone had leisure to observe her, that her resolution was already taken, and unalterable.

All that could be done to calm the queen's perturbed spirits by way of amusement Sir Nigel did; but his task was not an easy one, and the rumour which about this time reached him, that the Earls of Hereford and Lancaster, with a very large force, were rapidly advancing towards Aberdeenshire, did not lessen its difficulties. He sought to keep the information as long as possible from all his female charge, although the appearance of many terrified villagers flying from their homes to the protection of the castle hardly enabled him to do so, and confirmed without doubt the truth of what he had heard. Nigel felt the moment of peril was approaching, and he nerved both mind and frame to meet it. The weak terrors of the queen and some of her train increased with every rumour, and, despite every persuasion of Sir Nigel, Seaton, and other brave and well-tried warriors, she rested not till a negotiation was entered into with the Earl of Ross to grant them a safe conduct through his lands, and permission to enter the sanctuary of St. Duthac.

Perplexed with many sad thoughts, Nigel Bruce was one day slowly traversing a long gallery leading to some uninhabited chambers in the west wing of the building; it was of different architecture, and ruder, heavier aspect than the remainder of the castle. Tradition said that those rooms had been the original building inhabited by an ancestor of the line of Bruce, and the remainder had been gradually added to them; that some dark deed of blood had been there committed, and consequently they were generally kept

locked, none of the vassals in the castle choosing to run the risk of meeting the spirits which they declared abode there. We have before said that Nigel was not superstitious, though his mind being of a cast which adopting and embodying the ideal, he was likely to be supposed such. The particulars of the tradition he had never heard, and consequently it was always with a smile of disbelief he listened to the oft-repeated injunction not to walk at dusk in the western turret. This warning came across him now, but his mind was far otherwise engrossed, too much so indeed for him even to give more than a casual glance to the rude portraits which hung on either side the gallery.

He mistrusted the Earl of Ross, and there came a fear upon his noble spirit that, in permitting the departure of the queen and her attendants, he might be liable to the censure of his sovereign, that he was failing in his trust; yet how was he to act, how put a restraint upon his charge? Had he indeed believed that the defence of the castle would be successful, that he should be enabled to force the besiegers to raise the siege, he might perhaps have felt justified in restraining the queen, but he did not feel this. He had observed there were many discontented and seditious spirits in the castle, not indeed in the three hundred of his immediate followers; but what were they compared to the immense force now pouring over the country, and whose goal he knew was Kildrummie. The increase of inmates also, from the number of small villages which had emptied their inhabitants into his walls, till he was compelled to prevent further ingress, must inevitably diminish his stores, and when once blockaded, to replenish them would be impossible. No personal fears, no weakness of purpose entered the high soul of Nigel Bruce amid these painful cogitations. He well knew no shade of dishonour *could* fall on him; he thought not one moment of his own fate, although if the castle were taken he knew death awaited him, either by the besieger's sword or the hangman's cord, for he would make no condition; he thought only that this was well-nigh the last castle in his brother's keeping, which if lost would, in the present depressed state of his affairs, be indeed a fatal blow and a still greater triumph to England.

These thoughts naturally engrossed his mind to the exclusion of all imaginative whisperings, and therefore was it

that he drew back the bolt of a door which closed the passage, without any of those peculiar feelings that at a less anxious time might have possessed him ; for souls less gifted than that of Nigel Bruce can seldom enter a spot hallowed by tradition, without the electric thrill which so strangely unites the present with the past.

It was a chamber of moderate dimensions to which the oaken door admitted him, hung with coarse and faded tapestry, which, disturbed by the wind, disclosed an opening into another passage, through which he pursued his way. In the apartment on which the dark and narrow passage ended, however, his steps were irresistibly arrested. It was panelled with black oak, of which the floor also was composed, giving the whole an aspect calculated to infect the most thoughtless spirit with gloom. Two high and very narrow windows, the small panes of which were quite incrustated with dust, were the only conductors of light, with the exception of a loophole—for it could scarcely be dignified by the name of casement—on the western side. Through this loophole the red light of a declining winter sun sent its rays, which were caught and stayed on what seemed at the distance an antique picture-frame. Wondering to perceive a picture out of its place in the gallery, Nigel hastily advanced towards it, pausing, however, on his way to examine, with some surprise, one of the planks in the floor, which, instead of the beautiful black polish which age had rather heightened than marred in the rest, was rough and white, with all the appearance of having been hewn and scraped by some sharp instrument.

It is curious to mark how trifling a thing will sometimes connect, arrange, and render clear as day to the mind all that has before been vague, imperfect, and indistinct. It is like the touch of lightning on an electric chain, link after link starts up till we see the illumined whole. We have said Nigel had never heard the particulars of the tradition ; but he looked on that misshapen plank, and in an instant a tale of blood and terror weaved itself in his mind ; in that room the deed, whatever it was, had been done, and from that plank the sanguine evidence of murder had been with difficulty erased. A cold shuddering passed over him, and he turned instinctively away, and strode hastily to examine the frame which had attracted him. It did contain a picture—

we should rather say a portrait—for it comprised but one figure, the half-length of a youthful warrior, clad in steel, save the beautifully-formed head, which was covered only by his own luxuriant raven curls. In a better light it could not have been placed, particularly in the evening; the rays, condensed and softened, seemed to gather up their power into one focus, and throw such an almost supernatural glow on the half face, give such an extraordinary appearance of life to the whole figure, that a casual visitant to that chamber might well fancy it was no picture but reality on which he gazed. But no such emotion was at work in the bosom of Nigel Bruce, though his first glance upon that face occasioned an almost convulsive start, and then a gaze of such intense, such almost fearful interest, that he stood as if fascinated by some overpowering spell. His features, worked with internal emotions, flushed and paled alternately. It was no weak-minded terror which bound him there, no mood in which a step or sound could chill and startle, for so wrapt was he in his own strange dreams, that he heard not a slow and measured step approach him; he did not even start when he felt a hand laid on his shoulder, and the melodious voice of the seer caused him to turn slowly round.

"The warnings thou hast heard have no power on thee, young lord," he said, slightly smiling, "or I should not see thee here at this hour alone. Yet thou wert strangely wrapt."

"Knowest thou aught of *him*, good father?" answered Nigel, in a voice that to his own ears sounded hoarse and unnatural, and turning his glance once again to the portrait. "My thoughts are busy with that face and yon tale-telling plank; there are wild, feverish, incongruous dreams within me, and I would have them solved. Thou of all others art best fitted to the task, for amid the records of the past, where thou hast loved to linger, thou hast surely found the tradition of this tower. I shame not to confess there is in my heart a deep yearning to learn the truth. Wherefore, when thy harp and song have so pleasantly whiled the evening hours, did not this tale find voice, good father?"

"Alas! my son, 'tis too fraught with horror, too sad for gentle ears. A few stern, rugged words will best repeat it. I love not to linger on the theme; listen then, now, and it shall be told thee."

“In the reign of Malcolm the Second, the districts now called Aberdeen and Forfar were possessed, and had been so, so tradition saith, since Kenneth Mac-Alpine, by the Lords of Brus or Bris, a family originally from the North. They were largely and nobly connected, particularly with Norway and Gaul. It is generally supposed the first possessions in Scotland held in fief by the line of Bruce can be traced back only to the time of David I., in the person of Robert de Bruce, an Anglo-Norman baron, whose father came over to England with the Conqueror. The cause of this supposition my tale will presently explain.

“Haco Brus or Bris was the Lord of Aberdeen in the reign of Malcolm the Second. He spent many years abroad, indeed, was supposed to have married and settled there, when, to the surprise of his vassals, he suddenly returned unmarried, and soon after uniting himself with a beautiful and accomplished girl, nearly related to the blood-royal of Scotland, settled quietly in this tower, which was the stronghold of his possessions. Years passed ; the only child of the baron, a son, born in the first year of his marriage, grew up in strength and beauty, the idol not only of his mother, but of his father, a man stern and cold in seeming, even morose, but with passions fearful alike in their influence and extent. Your eye glances to that pictured face ; he was not the baron’s son of whom I speak. The affections, nay, the very passions of the baron were centred in this boy. It is supposed pride and ambition were their origin, for he looked, through his near connection with the sovereign, for further aggrandizement for himself. There were some who declared ambition was not the master-passion, that a deeper, sterner, fiercer emotion dwelt within. Whether they spoke thus from the sequel, I know not, but that sequel proved their truth.

“There was a gathering of all the knightly and noble in King Malcolm’s court, not perchance for trials at arms resembling the tournaments of the present day, but very similar in their motive and bearing, though ruder and more dangerous. The wreath of glory and victory was ever given by the gentle hand of beauty. Bright eyes and lovely forms presided at the sports even now, and the king and his highest nobles joined in the revels.

“The wife of the Baron of Brus and his son, now a fine

boy of thirteen, were of course amongst the royal guests. Though matronly grace and dignified demeanour had taken the place of the blushing charms of early girlhood, the Lady Helen Brus was still very beautiful, and as the niece of the king and wife of such a distinguished baron, commanded and received universal homage. Among the combatants was a youthful knight, of an exterior and bearing so much more polished and graceful than his sons of the soil or their more northern visitors, that he was instantly recognised as coming from Gaul, then as now the most polished kingdom of the south. Delighted with his bravery, his modesty, and most chivalric bearing, the king treated him with most distinguished honour, invited him to the palace, spoke with him as friend with friend on the kingdoms of Normandy and France, to the former of which he was subject. There was a mystery too about the young knight, which heightened the interest he excited ; he bore no device on his shield, no cognizance whatever to mark his name and birth ; and his countenance, beautiful as it was, often when in repose expressed sadness and care unusual to his years, for he was still very young, though in reply to the king's solicitations that he would choose one of Scotland's fairest maidens (her dower should be princely), and make the Scottish court his home, he had smilingly avowed that he was already a husband and father.

"The notice of the king, of course, inspired the nobles with similar feelings of hospitality. Attention and kindness were lavished on the stranger from all, and nothing was talked of but the nameless knight. The Lord of Brus, who had been absent on a mission to a distant court during the continuance of the martial games, was on his return presented by the king himself to the young warrior. It is said that both were so much moved by this meeting, that all present were mystified still more. The baron, with that deep subtlety for which he was remarkable, recovered himself the first, and accounted for his emotion to the satisfaction of his hearers, though not apparently to that of the stranger, who, though his cheek was blanched, still kept his bright searching eyes upon him, till the baron's quailed 'neath his gaze. The hundred tongues of rumour chose to speak of relationship, that there was a likeness between them, yet I know not how that could be. There is no impress of the

fiendish passion at work in the baron's soul on those bright, beautiful features."

"Ha! Is it of him you speak?" involuntarily escaped from Nigel, as the old man for a moment paused; "of him? Methought yon portrait was of an ancestor of Bruce, or wherefore is it here?"

"Be patient, good my son. My narrative wanders, for my lips shrink from its tale. That the baron and the knight met, not in warlike joust but in peaceful converse, and at the request of the latter, is known, but on what passed in that interview, even tradition is silent, it can only be imagined by the sequel; they appeared, however, less reserved than at first. The baron treated him with the same distinction as his fellow nobles, and the stranger's manner towards him was even more respectful than the mere difference of age appeared to demand. Important business with the Lord of Brus was alleged as the cause of his accepting that nobleman's invitation to the tower of Kildrummie, in preference to others earlier given and more eagerly enforced. They departed together, the knight accompanied but by two of his followers, and the baron leaving the greater number of his in attendance on his wife and child, who, for some frivolous reason, he left with the court. It was a strange thing for him to do, men said, as he had never before been known to lose sight of his boy, even for a day. For some days all seemed peace and hospitality within the tower. The stranger was too noble himself, and too kindly disposed towards all his fellow creatures, to suspect aught of treachery, or he might have remarked the retainers of the baron were changed; that ruder forms and darker visages than at first were gathering around him. How the baron might have intended to make use of them—almost all robbers and murderers by trade—cannot be known, though it may be suspected. In this room the last interview between them took place, and here, on this silent witness of the deed, the hand of the father was bathed in the blood of the son!"

"God in heaven!" burst from Nigel's parched lips, as he sprung up. "The son—how could that be? how known?"

"Fearfully, most fearfully!" shudderingly answered the old man; "through the dying ravings of the maniac Lord of Brus himself. Had not heaven, in its all-seeing justice, thus

revealed it, the crime would ever have remained concealed. His bandit hirelings were at hand to remove and bury, many fathoms deep in moat and earth, all traces of the deed. One of the unfortunate knight's followers was supposed to have shared the fate of his master, and to the other, who escaped almost miraculously, you owe the preservation of your royal line."

"But there was one witness of the deed neither time nor the most cunning art could efface. The blood lay in a pool on the oaken floor, and the voice of tradition whispers that day after day it was supernaturally renewed; that vain were the efforts to absorb it, it ever seemed moist and red; and that to remove the plank and re-floor the apartment was attempted again and again in vain. However this may be, it is evident that *erasing it* was attended with extreme difficulty; that the blood had penetrated well-nigh through the immense thickness of the wood."

Nigel stooped down over the crumbling fragment; years, aye, centuries had rolled away, yet there it still stood, arrested it seemed even in its decay, not permitted to crumble into dust, but to remain an everlasting monument of crime and its retribution. After a brief pause Nigel resumed his seat, and pushing the hair from his brow, which was damp with some untold emotion, signed to the old man to proceed.

"That the stranger warrior returned not to Malcolm's court, and had failed in his promises to various friends, was a matter of disappointment, and for a time, of conjecture to the king and his court. That his followers, in obedience, it was said, to their master's signet, set off instantly to join him either in England or Normandy, for both of which places they had received directions, satisfied the greater number. If others suspected foul play, it was speedily hushed up; for the baron was too powerful, too closely related to the throne, and justice then too weak in Scotland to permit accusation or hope for conviction. Time passed, and the only change observable in the baron was, that he became more gloomy, more abstracted, wrapt up, as it were, in one dark remembrance, one all-engrossing thought. Towards his wife he was changed—harsh, cold, bitterly sarcastic; as if her caresses had turned to gall. Her gentle spirit sunk beneath the withering blight, and he was heard

to laugh, the mocking laugh of a fiend, as he followed her to the grave; her child indeed, he still idolized, but it was a fearful affection, and a just heaven permitted not its continuance. The child, to whom many had looked as likely to ascend the Scottish throne, from the failure of all direct heirs, the beautiful and innocent child of a most guilty father, faded like a lovely flower before him, so softly, so gradually that there came no suspicion of death till the cold hand was on his heart, and he lay lifeless before him who had plunged his soul in deadliest crime through that child to aggrandize himself. Then was it that remorse, torturing before, took the form of partial madness, and there was not one who had power to restrain or guide or soothe.

“Then it was the fearful tale was told, freezing the blood, not so much with the wild madness of the tone, but that the words were too collected, too stamped with truth, to admit of aught like doubt. The couch of the baron was, at his own command, placed here, where we now stand, covering the spot where his first-born fell, and that portrait, obtained from Normandy, hung where it now is, ever in his sight. The dark tale which those wild ravings revealed was simply this :

“He had married, as was suspected, during his wanderings, but soon tired of the yoke, more particularly as his wife possessed a spirit proud and haughty as his own, and all efforts to mould her to his will were useless, he plunged anew into his reckless career. He had never loved his wife, marrying her simply because it suited his convenience, and brought him increase of wealth and station; and her ill-disguised abhorrence of many of his actions, her beautiful adherence to virtue, however tempted, occasioned all former feelings to concentrate in hatred the most deadly. More than one attempt to rid himself of her by poison she had discovered and frustrated, and at last removed herself and her child, under a feigned name, to Normandy, and ably eluded all pursuit and inquiry.

“The baron’s search continued some time, in the hope of silencing her for ever, as he feared she might prove a dangerous enemy, but failing in his wishes, he travelled some time over different countries, returned at length to Scotland, and acted as we have seen. The young knight had been informed of his birthright by his mother at her

death, which took place two years before he made his appearance in Scotland ; that she had concealed from him the fearful character of his father, being unable so completely to divest herself of all feeling towards the father of her child, as to make him an object of aversion to his son. She had long told him his real name, and urged him to demand from his father an acknowledgement of his being heir to the proud barony of the Bruce. His likeness to herself was so strong, that she knew it must carry conviction to his father ; but to make his identity still more certain, she furnished him with certain jewels and papers, none but herself could produce. She had done this in the presence of two faithful witnesses, the father and brother of her son's betrothed bride, high lords of Normandy, the former of which made it a condition annexed to his consent to the marriage, that as soon as possible afterwards he should urge and claim his rights. Sir Walter, of course, willingly complied ; they were married by the name of Brus, and their child so baptized. A war, which retained Sir Walter in arms with his sovereign, prevented his seeking Scotland till his boy was a year old, and then for his sake, far more than for his own, the young father determined on asserting his birthright, his child should not be nameless, as he had been ; but to spare his unknown parent all public mortification, he joined the martial games without any cognizance or bearing on his shield.

"Terrible were the ravings in which the baron alluded to the interview he had had with his murdered child ; the angelic mildness and generosity of the youthful warrior ; that, amid all his firmness never to depart from his claim—as it was not alone himself but his child he would irreparably injure—he never wavered in his respectful deference to his parent. He quitted the court in the belief that the baron sought Kildrummie to collect the necessary papers for substantiating his claim ; but ere he died, it appeared his eyes were opened. The fierce passions of the baron had been too long restrained in the last interview ; they burst even his politic control, and he had flung the papers received from the hand of his too confiding son on the blazing hearth, and with dreadful oaths swore that if he would not instantly retract his claim, and bind himself by the most sacred promise never to breath the foul tale again, death should be its

silent keeper. He would not bring his own head low, and avow that he had dishonoured a scion of the blood-royal.

"Appalled far more at the dark, fiendish passions he beheld than the threat held out to himself, Sir Walter stood silent awhile, and then mildly demanded to be heard; that if so much public mortification to his parent would attend the pursuance of his claims at the present time, he would consent to forego them, on condition of his father's solemnly promising on his deathbed to reveal the truth, and do him tardy justice then, but forego them altogether he would not, were his life the forfeit. The calm firmness of his tone, it is supposed, lashed his father into greater madness, and thus the dark deed was done.

"That the baron several times endeavoured to possess himself of the infant child of Sir Walter, also came to light in his dying moments; that he had determined to exterminate root and branch, fearful he should still possess some clue to his birth, he had frantically avowed; but in his last hour, he would have given all his amassed treasure, his greatness, his power, but for one little moment of assurance that his grandson lived. He left him all his possessions, his lordship, his name, but as there were none came forth to claim, they of necessity passed to the crown."

"But the child, the son of Sir Walter—if from him our line descends, he must have lived to manhood—why did not he demand his rights?"

"He lived, aye, and had a goodly progeny; but the fearful tale of his father's fate related to him again and again by the faithful Edric, who had fled from his master's murdered corse to watch over the safety of that master's child, and warn all who had the charge of him of the fiend in human shape who would probably seek the boy's life as he had his father's, caused him to shun the idea of his Scottish possessions with a loathing horror which he could not conquer; they were associated with the loss of both his parents, for his father's murder killed his devoted mother. He was contented to feel himself Norman in possessions as well as in name. He received lands and honour from the Dukes of Normandy, and at the advanced age of seventy and five, accompanied Duke William to England. The third generation from him obtained anew Scottish possessions, and gradually Kildrummie and its feudal tenures returned to

its original lords ; but the tower had been altered and enlarged, and except the tradition of these chambers, the fearful fate of the second of the line has faded from the minds of his descendants, unless casually or supernaturally recalled."

"Ha ! supernaturally, sayest thou ?" interrupted Nigel, in a tone so peculiar it almost startled his companion. "Are there those who assert they have seen his semblance—good, gifted, beautiful as thou hast described him ? why not at once deem him the guardian spirit of our house ?"

"And there are those who deem him so, young lord," answered the seer. "It is said that until the Lords of Bruce again obtained possession of these lands, in the visions of the night the form of the murdered warrior, clad as in yon portrait, save with the addition of a scarf across his breast bearing the crest and cognizance of the Bruce, appeared once in his lifetime to each lineal descendant. Such visitations are said to have ceased, and he is now only seen by those destined like himself to an early and bloody death, cut off in the prime of manhood, nobleness, and joy."

"And where—sleeping or waking ?" demanded the young nobleman, in a low, deep tone, laying his hand on the minstrel's arm, and looking fixedly on his now strangely agitated face.

"Sleeping or waking ? it hath been both," he answered, and his voice faltered. "If it be in the front of the war, amid the press, the crush, the glory of the battle, he hath come, circled with bright forms and brighter dreams, to the sleeping warrior on the eve of his last fight ; if"—and his voice grew lower and huskier yet—"if by the red hand of the foe, by the captive's chain and headsman's axe, as the noble Wallace, there have been those who say—I vouch not for its truth—he hath been seen in the vigils of the night on the eve of knighthood, when the young, aspiring warrior hath watched and prayed beside his arms. Boy ! boy ! why dost thou look upon me thus ?"

"Because thine eye hath read my doom," he said, in a firm, sweet tone ; "and if there be aught of truth in this tale, thou knowest, feelest I have seen him. God of mercy, the captive's chain, the headman's axe ! Yet 'tis Thy will, and for my country—let it come."

CHAPTER XVII.

"THOU art idle, maiden ; wherefore not gather thy robes and other gear together as thy companions ? Knowest thou not in twenty-four hours we shall be, heaven willing, safely sheltered under the holy wing of St. Duthac ?" was Queen Margaret's address to Agnes, about a week after the conversation we have recorded. There were many signs of confusion and tokens of removal in her scanty train, but the maiden of Buchan stood apart, offering assistance when needed, but making no arrangements for herself.

"I seek not such holy keeping, may it please you, madam," she replied. "I do not quit this castle."

"How?" exclaimed Margaret. "Art thou mad?"

"In what, royal madam?"

"Or hath love blinded thee, girl? Knowest thou not Hereford and Lancaster are advancing as rapidly as their iron-clad force permits, and in less than seven days the castle must be besieged in form?"

"I know it, madam."

"And thou wilt brave it, maiden?—dare a danger that may be avoided? Is thy life of so little worth, or if not thy life, thy liberty?"

"When a life is wrapt up in one—when there is none on earth save that one to whom that life is of any worth, wherefore should I seek safety save by his side? Royal madam, I am not mad nor blind; but desolate as I am—nay, were I not 'twould be the same—I covet to share Sir Nigel's fate; the blow that strikes him shall lay me at his side, be it in prison or in death. My safety is with him; and were the danger ten times as great as that which threatens now, I'd share it with him still."

"Nay, thou art but a loving fool, Agnes. Be advised, seek safety in the sanctuary; peril cannot reach us there."

"Save by the treachery of the dark-browed earl who grants that shelter. Nay, pardon me, madam; thou lovest not to list that theme, believing him as honourable and faithful as thyself. God grant he prove so! If," she added, with a faint smile, "if it be such mad folly to cling to a beloved one in danger as in joy, in adversity as in triumph,

forgive me, royal lady, but thy maidens have learned that tale of thee."

"And would to God I could teach them thus again!" exclaimed the queen, tears coursing down her cheeks. "Oh, Agnes, Agnes, were Robert here, not death itself should part us. For my child's sake, for his, I go hence for safety. Could my resting, nay, my death benefit him, Agnes, I would meet it, weak as thou deemest me."

"Nay, nay, I doubt it not, my queen," answered Agnes, soothingly. "It is best thou shouldst find some place of repose till this struggle be past. If it end in victory, it will be joy to hail thee once again within its walls; if otherwise, better thy safety should be cared for."

"But for thee, my child, is it not unmaidenly for thee to linger here?"

"It would be, royal madam," and a bright vivid flush glowed on her pale cheeks, "but for the protection of the Lady Seaton, who will not leave her husband."

"I may not blame her after mine own words," said the queen, sorrowfully; "yet she is one I could have wished beside me. Ha! that trumpet. Merciful heaven! is it the foe?" and trembling with alarm, she despatched attendant after attendant to know the cause.

The English force was known to be so near that many a warrior heart beat quicker at any unusual blast, and it was not marvel the queen's terrors should very often affect her attendants. Agnes alone, amid the maiden train, ever retained a calm self-possession; strange in one who, till the last eventful year, had seemed such a very child. Her mother trembled lest the turmoils and confusion of her country should ever approach her or those she loved; how might she, timid, nay, often fearful, weak and yielding, as the flower on the heath, how might she encounter storm, and grief, and care? Had her mother's eye been on her now, and could have followed her in yet deeper trials, that mother scarce had known her child.

She it was whose coolness enabled her easily to recognise and explain the trumpet's blast. It was an officer with an escort from the lord of Ross, informing the queen that, from late intelligence respecting the movements of the English, he deemed it better they should not defer their departure from the castle another night.

On the receipt of his message all was increased hurry and confusion in the apartments of the queen. The advice was to be followed on the instant, and ere sunset the litters and mules, and other accommodation for the travellers, waited their pleasure in the outer court.

It was with a mien of princely dignity, a countenance grave and thoughtful with which the youthful seneschal attended the travellers to the great gate of the castle. In after years the expression of his features flashed again and again upon those who looked upon him then. Calmly he bade his sister-in-law farewell, and bade her, should she be the first to see his brother, tell him that it was at her own free will and pleasure she thus departed; that neither advice nor persuasion on his part had been used; she had of her own will released him from his sacred charge, and if ill came of it, to free his memory from blame.

"Trust me, Nigel; oh, surely you may trust me! You will not part from me in anger at my wilfulness?" entreated Margaret, as clinging to his arm, she retained him a few minutes ere he placed her in the litter.

"In anger, my sweet sister, nay, thou wrongest me!" he said, a bright smile dispersing a moment the pensive cast of his features. "In sorrow, perchance, for I love not him to whose care thou hast committed thyself; yet if ill await this castle, and thou wert with me, 'twould enhance its bitterness. No, 'tis better thou shouldst go; though I would it were not to the Lord of Ross."

"And wherefore?" demanded the deep stern voice of the officer beside him.

"Because I doubt him, Archibald Macfarlane," sternly replied the young nobleman, fixing his flashing eyes upon him; and thou mayst so inform him as thou wilt. An I do him wrong, let him deliver the Queen of Scotland and her attendants in safety to King Robert, in the forthcoming spring, and Nigel Bruce will crave forgiveness for the wrong that he hath done him; nay, let his conduct give my doubts the lie, and I will even thank him, sir."

Turning on his heel, he conducted the queen to her litter, and bade a graceful farewell to all her fair companions, bidding good angels speed them on their way. The heavy gates were thrown back, the portcullis raised and the draw-bridge lowered, and amid a parting cheer from the men-at-

arms drawn up in the court in military homage to their queen, the cavalcade departed, attended only by the men of Ross, for the number of the garrison was too limited to admit of their attendance anywhere, save within and on the walls.

With folded arms and an anxious brow, Sir Nigel stood beside the gate, marking the progress of the train; a gentle voice aroused him. It playfully said, "Come to the highest turret, Nigel, there thou wilt trace their path as long as light remains." He started, for Agnes was at his side. He drew her arm within his own, briefly gave the command to close the gate and make all secure, and turned with her in the direction of the keep.

"Have I done right," he said, as, when they had reached a more retired path, he folded his arm caressingly around her, and drew her closer to him, "to list thy pleadings, dearest, to grant thy boon? oh, if *they* go to safety, why did I listen to thee and permit thee to remain?"

"Nay, there is equal safety within these walls, Nigel. Be assured, thine Agnes hath neither regret nor doubt when thou art by her side," she answered, still playfully. "I love not the sanctuaries they go to seek; the stout hearts and trusty blades of warriors like thee and thine, my Nigel, are better and truer safeguards."

"Alas! Agnes, I fear me not in cases such as these. I am not wont to be desponding, but from the small number of true men which garrison this castle, I care not to acknowledge I had loved better to meet my foe on open ground. Here I can scarce know friend from foe; traitors may be around me, nay, in my very confidence, and I know it not."

"Art thou not infected with Queen Margaret's suspicions, Nigel! Why ponder on such uneasy dreams?"

"Because, my best love, I am a better adept in the perusal of men's countenances and manners than many, and there are signs of lowering discontent and gloomy cowardice arguing ill for unity of measures, on which our safety greatly rests. Yet my fancies may be wrong, and at all hazards my duty shall be done. The issue is in the hands of a higher power; we cannot do wrong in committing ourselves to Him, for thou knowest He giveth not the battle to the strong, and right and justice we have on Scotland's side."

Agnes looked on his face, and she saw, though he spoke cheerfully, his thoughts echoed not his words. She would

not express her own anxiety, but led him gently to explain to her his plan of defence, and prepare her for all she might have to encounter.

Five days passed, and all within and without the walls remained the same ; the sixth was the Sabbath, and the greater part of the officers and garrison were assembled in the chapel, where divine service was regularly read by the Abbot of Scone, whom we should perhaps before have mentioned as having, at the king's especial request, accompanied the queen and her attendants to Kildrummie. It was a solemn yet stirring sight, that little edifice, filled as it was with steel-clad warriors and rude and dusky forms, now bending in one prayer before their God. The proud, the lowly, the faithless and the true, the honourable and the base, the warrior, whose whole soul burned and throbbed but for his country and his king, the coward, whose only thought was how he could obtain life for himself and save the dread of war by the surrender of the castle—one and all knelt there, the workings of those diverse hearts known but to Him before whom they bent. Strangely and mournfully did that little group of delicate females gleam forth amidst the darker and harsher forms around, as a knot of fragile flowers blooming alone, and unsheltered amidst some rude old forest trees, safe in their own lowliness from the approaching tempest but liable to be overwhelmed in the fall of their companions, whom yet they would not leave. As calmly as in his own abbey the venerable abbot read the holy service, and administered the rites of religion to all who sought. It was in the deep silence of individual prayer which preceded the chanting of the conclusion of the service that a shrill, peculiar blast of a trumpet was heard. On the instant it was recognised as the bugle of the warder stationed on the centre turret of the keep, as the blast which told the foe was at length in sight. Once, twice, thrice it sounded, at irregular intervals, even as Nigel had commanded ; the notes were caught up by the warders on the walls, and repeated again and again. A sudden cry of "the foe !" broke from the soldiers scattered round, and again all was silence. There had been a movement almost a confusion in some parts of the church, but the officers and those who had followed them from the mountains neither looked up nor stirred. The imperative gesture of the abbot commanded

and retained order and silence, the service proceeded ; there might have been some faltering in the tones of the choir, but the swelling notes of the organ concealed the deficiency.

The eye of Agnes voluntarily sought her betrothed. His head was still bent down in earnest prayer, but she had not looked long before she saw him raise it and lift up his clasped hands in the evident passionate fervour of his prayer. So beautiful, so gloriously beautiful was that countenance thus breathing prayer, so little seemed that soul of earth, that tears started to the eyes of Agnes, and the paleness of strong emotion overspread the cheek, eye, and the quivering lip, which the war and death-speaking trumpet had had no power to disturb.

"Let me abide by him, merciful Father, in weal or in woe ; oh, part us not !" she prayed again and yet again, and the bright smile which now encircled his lips—for he had caught her glance—seemed an answer to her prayer.

It was a beautiful, though perhaps to many of the inmates of Kildrummie a terrible sight, which from the roof of the turret now presented itself to their view. The English force lay before them, presenting many a solid phalanx of steel, many a glancing wood of spears. Nor were these all ; the various engines used in sieges at this time, battering-rams, and others, whose technical names are unfortunately lost to us, but used to fling stones of immense weight to an almost incredible distance ; arbalists, and the incomparable archer, who carried as many lives as arrows in his belt ; waggons, heavily laden with all things necessary for a close and numerous encampment—all these could be painly distinguished in rapid advance towards the castle, marking their path through the country by the smoke of the hamlets they had burned. Many and eager voices resounded from various parts of the castle ; numbers had thronged to the tower, with their own eyes to mark the approach of the enemy, and to report all they had seen to their companions below, triumphantly or despondingly, according to the temper of their mind. Sir Nigel Bruce and Sir Christopher Seaton, with other of the superior officers, stood a little apart, conversing eagerly and animatedly, and finally separating, with an eager grasp of the hand, to perform the duties intrusted to each.

"Ha ! Christine, and thou, fair maiden," exclaimed Sir Christopher, gaily, as on turning he encountered his wife and Agnes arm-in-arm. "By mine honour, this is bravely done ; ye will not wait in your tiring-bower till your knights seek ye, but come for information yourselves. Well, 'tis a goodly company, is't not ? as gallant a show as ever mustered, by my troth. Those English warriors tacitly do us honour, and proclaim our worth by the numbers of gallant men they bring against us. We shall return the compliment some day, and pay them similar homage."

His wife smiled at his jest, and even felt reassured, for it was not the jest of a mind ill at ease, it was the same bluff, soldier spirit she had always loved.

"And Nigel, what thinkest thou ?"

"Think, dearest ?" he said, answering far more the appealing look of Agnes than her words ; "think ? that we shall do well, aye, nobly well ; they muster not half the force they led me to expect. The very sight of them has braced me with new spirit, and put to ignominious flight the doubts and dreams I told thee had tormented me."

Movement and bustle now pervaded every part of the castle, but all was conducted with an order and military skill that spoke well for the officers to whom it was intrusted. The walls were manned ; pickaxes and levers, for the purposes of hurling down stones on the besiegers, collected and arranged on the walls ; arms polished, and so arranged that the hand might grasp them at a minute's warning, were brought from the armoury to every court and tower ; the granaries and storehouses were visited, and placed under trustworthy guards. A band of picked men, under an experienced officer, threw themselves into the barbican, determined to defend it to the last. Sir Nigel and Sir Christopher visited every part of the outworks, displaying the most unceasing care, encouraged the doubting, roused the timid, and cheered and inspired the boldest with new confidence, new hope ; but one feeling appeared to predominate, liberty and Scotland seemed the watchword of one and all.

Onward, like a mighty river, rolled the English force, nearer and nearer, till the middle of the second day saw them encamped within a quarter of a mile from the palisades and outworks raised on either side of the barbican. Obtaining easy possession of the river—for Sir Nigel,

aware of the great disparity of numbers, had not even attempted its defence—they formed three distinct bodies round the walls, the strongest and noblest setting down before the barbican, as the principal point of attack. Numerous as they had appeared in the distance, well provided with all that could forward their success, it was not till closer seen all their strength could be discovered ; but there was no change in the hopes and gallant feelings of the Scottish officers and their men-at-arms, though, could hearts have been read, the timidity, the doubts, the anxious wishes to make favourable peace with the English had in some of the original garrison alarmingly increased.

Before, however, any recourse was made to arms, an English herald, properly supported, demanded and obtained admission within the gates, on a mission from the Earls of Hereford and Lancaster, to Sir Christopher Seaton, Sir Nigel Bruce, and others of command. They were summoned to deliver up the castle and themselves to their liege lord and sovereign King Edward ; to submit to his mercy, and grace should be shown to them, and safe conduct granted to all those who, taking refuge within the walls and adopting a position of defence, proclaimed themselves rebels and abettors of rebellion ; that they should have freedom to return to their homes uninjured, not only in their persons but in their belongings ; and this should be on the instant the gates were thrown open, and the banner of England had taken the place of that of Scotland now floating from their keep.

“Tell thy master, thou smooth-tongued knave,” burst angrily from the lips of Sir Christopher Seaton, as he half rose from his seat and clenched his mailed hand at the speaker, and then hastily checking himself, added, in a lower tone, “answer him, Nigel ; thou hast eloquence at thy command ; I have none, save at my sword’s point, and my temper is somewhat too hot to list such words, courteous though they may be.”

“Tell your master, sir herald,” continued Nigel, rising as his colleague flung himself back on his seat, and though his voice was sternly calm, his manner was still courteous, “tell them they may spare themselves the trouble, and their followers the danger, of all farther negotiation. We are Scottish men and Scottish subjects, and

consequently to all the offers of England we are as if we heard not. Neither rebels nor abettors of rebels, we neither acknowledge the necessity of submitting ourselves to a tyrant's mercy, nor desire the advantage of his offered grace. Return, sir herald; we scorn the conditions proposed. We are here for Scotland and for Scotland's king, and for them we know both how to live and how to die."

His words were echoed by all around him, and there was a sharp clang of steel, as if each man half drew his eager sword, which spoke yet truer than mere words. Dark brows and features stern were bent upon the herald as he left their presence, and animated council followed his departure.

No new movement followed the return of the herald. For some days no decisive operation was observable in the English force; and when they did attack the outworks, it was as if more to pass the time than with any serious intent. It was a period of fearful suspense to the besieged. Their storehouses were scarcely sufficiently provided to hold out for any great length of time, and they almost imagined that to reduce them to extremities by famine was the intention of the besiegers. The greatest danger, if encountered hand to hand in the *mélée*, was welcome, but the very idea of a slow, lingering fate, with the enemy before them, mocking their misery, was terrible to the bravest. A daring sally into the very thickest of the enemy's camp, headed by Nigel and his own immediate followers, carrying all before them, and when by numbers compelled to retreat, bearing both booty and prisoners with them, roused the English from their confident supposition that the besieged would soon be obliged to capitulate, and urged them into action. The ire of the haughty English blazed up at what seemed such daring insolence in their petty foe. Decisive measures were resorted to on the instant, and increased bustle appeared to pervade both besiegers and besieged.

"Pity thou art already a knight, Nigel!" bluffly exclaimed Seaton, springing into his saddle by torchlight the following morning, as with a gallant band he was about dashing over the drawbridge, to second the defenders of the barbican and palisades. "How shall we reward thee, my boy? Thou hast brought the foe to bay. Hark! they are

there before me," and he spurred on to the very centre of the *mêlée*.

Sir Nigel was not long after him. The enemy was driven back with fearful loss. Scaling-ladders were thrown down; the archers on the walls, better accustomed to their ground, marking their foes by the torches they carried, but concealed themselves by the darkness, dealt destruction with as unerring hand as their more famous English brethren. Shouts and cries rose on either side; the English bore back before the sweeping stroke of Nigel Bruce as before the scythe of death. For the brief space of an hour the strife lasted, and still victory was on the side of the Scots—glorious victory, purchased with scarce the loss of ten men. The English fled back to their camp, leaving many wounded and dead on the field, and some prisoners in the hands of the Scots. Ineffectual efforts were made to harass the Scots, as with a daring coolness seldom equalled, they repaired the outworks, and planted fresh palisades to supply those which had fallen in the strife, in the very face of the English, many of them coolly detaching the arrows which, shot at too great distance, could not penetrate the thick lining of their buff coats, and scornfully flinging them back. Several sharp skirmishes took place that day, both under the walls and at a little distance from them; but in all the Scots were victorious, and when night fell all was joy and triumph in the castle; shame, confusion, and fury in the English camp.

For several days this continued. If at any time the English, by superiority of numbers, were victorious, they were sure to be taken by surprise by an impetuous sally from the besieged, and beaten back with loss, and so sudden and concealed were the movements of Nigel and Seaton, that though besiegers lay closer and closer round the castle, the moment of their setting forth on their daring expeditions could never be discovered.

"Said I not we should do well, right well, sweet Agnes," exclaimed Nigel, one night, on his return from an unusually successful sally, "and are not my words true? Hast thou looked forth on the field to-day, and seen how gloriously it went? Oh, to resign this castle to my brother's hands unscathed, even as he intrusted it; to hold it for him, threatened as it is!"

He smiled gaily as he spoke, for the consciousness of power was upon him—power to *will* and *do*, to win and to retain—that most blessed consciousness, whether it bless a hero's breast or poet's soul, a maiden's heart or scholar's dream, this chequered world can know.

"I did look forth, my Nigel, for I could not rest; yet ask me not to tell thee how the battle went," she added, with a faint flush, as she looked up in his noble face, beaming as it was with every feeling dear to the heart that loved, "for I traced but the course of one charger, saw but the waving of one plume."

"And thou didst not fear the besiegers' arrows, my beloved? Didst stand in the shelter I contrived? Thou must not risk danger, dearest; better not list the urgings of thy noble spirit than be aught exposed."

"There was no danger, Nigel, at least there seemed none," she said. "I felt no fear, for I looked on thee."

CHAPTER XVIII.

HAD the gallant defenders of Kildrummie Castle been conscious that the at first dilatory and then uncertain measures of their foes originated in the fact that the Earls of Hereford and Lancaster were not themselves yet on the field, and that they had with them a vast addition to their forces, they would not perhaps have rested so securely on the hopes which their unexpected success very naturally engendered. Attack on one side they knew they could resist; their only dread had been that, from the numbers of the English, the angle towers, each of which covered a postern, might be attacked at once, and thus discover the real weakness of their forces. The obstinate struggle for the barbican, the strongest point of the castle, had been welcomed with joy by the Scotch, for there they could overlook every movement of the besiegers. Some wonder it did cause that such renowned knights as the earls were known to be, should not endeavour to throw them off their guard by a division of attack; but this wonder could not take from the triumph of success.

It was from no want of observation the absence of the two

earls remained undiscovered by the besieged. Engaged on a secret expedition, whose object will be seen in the sequel, they had commanded the message demanding surrender to be given in their names, their pavilions to be pitched in sight of the castle, as if they were already there, their banners to wave above them, esquires and pages to be in attendance, and their war-cries to be shouted, as was the custom when they led on in person. The numerous knights, clothed in bright armour from head to heel, ever traversing the field, assisted the illusion, and the Scotch never once suspected the truth.

Imagining a very brief struggle would deliver the castle into their hands, even if its garrison were mad enough to refuse compliance with King Edward's terms, the earls had not hurried themselves on their expedition, and a fortnight after the siege had begun, were reposing themselves very cavalierly in the stronghold of an Anglo-Scottish baron, some thirty miles southward of the scene of action.

It was the hour of supper, a rude repast of venison, interspersed with horn and silver flagons filled with the strong liquors of the day, and served up in a rude hall, of which the low round arches in the roof, the massive walls without buttresses, and windows running small outside, but spreading as to become much larger within, all denoted the Saxon architecture unsoftened by any of the Norman improvements.

The earls and their host, with some attendant knights, sat as usual round the dais or raised part of the hall, their table distinguished it may be by some gold as well as silver vessels, and a greater variety of liquor, particularly hyppocras and claret of the day, the one formed of wine and honey, the other of wine and spices; by the sinner and wastel cakes, but certainly not by the superior refinement of the more solid food. The huge silver saltcellar alone divided the table of the baron from that of his dependants, yet the distinction of sitting above and below the salt was as great as the division between the master and servant of the present day; the jest, the loud laugh seasoned the viands placed before them, and the hearty draught from the welcome flagon. Nor was the baron's own table much quieter; remarks of the state of the country, speculations as to the hiding-place of King Robert, and when they should receive tidings of the surrender of Kildrummie, formed topics of conversation alternately with discussions on the excellence

of the wines, the flavour of the venison, the difference between English and Scotch cookery, and such like matters, important in the days of our ancestors as in our own.

"You have ridden long enough to-day, good my lords, to make a hearty charge on your suppers; a long journey and a tough battle, commend me to them for helps to the appetite," said the Scottish baron, joyously inviting them by his own example to eat on and spare not.

"Commend me to the latter, an ye will," answered Hereford, on whose brow a cloud of something like distaste had spread; "but by mine honour, I love not the business of the last week. I have brought it to a close, however, and praise the saints for it."

"Bah! thou art over-squeamish, Hereford. Edward would give us the second best jewel in his chaplet for the rich prize we have sent him," resumed Lancaster.

"Reserving the first, of course, for the traitor Bruce himself," interposed their host. "Ah! such a capture were in truth worth an earldom."

"Then, by my troth, the traitor's wife is worth a barony," returned Lancaster, laughing; "and her fair bevy of attendants, amongst whom are the wives, daughters, and sisters of many a rebel, thinkest thou not we shall be high in Edward's favour for them, too? I tell thee we might have fought many a good fight, and not have done him such good service."

"It may be, it may be," answered Hereford, impatiently; "had it been at the sword's point, had they been prisoners by force of arms, I would have joyed too, and felt it was good service; but such rank treachery, decoyed, entrapped by that foul prince of lies, the Lord of Ross—faugh! I could have rammed his treachery back into his throat."

"And done the king, perchance, good service too," rejoined Lancaster, still excessively amused, "for I have no faith in a traitor, however he may serve us awhile; yet thou art not over-wise, good friend, to let such trifles chafe thee thus. Trust me, Edward will think more of the captives than the capture."

"There was a time he would not," answered the earl, mournfully; "a time, when Edward would have held it foul scorn to war with women, and worse than scorn to obtain their persons by treachery, as now."

"Aye, but he has changed, and we must change too, would we please him," said the baron; "such notions might have done in former days, but they are too high flown for the present time, my good lord. I marvel they should have lingered so long with thee."

A frown gathered on Hereford's broad and noble brow, but remembering the forbearance due to his host, he checked an angry reply. "The king *has* changed," he said, "darkly and painfully changed; ambition has warped the noblest, knightliest heart which ever beat for chivalry."

"Hush, ere thou speakest treason, Sir Earl; give me not the pain of draining another flagon of this sparkling hypocras to gain strength for thine arrest, good friend," exclaimed Lancaster, laying the flat of his sword on the earl's shoulder.

Hereford half smiled. "Thou art too happy in thy light-hearted mirth for me to say aught that would so disturb it," he said; "yet I say, and will say again, would to heaven I had been before the gates of Kildrummie, and left to thee all the honour and glory, an thou wilt, of this capture."

"Honour and glory, thou bitter piece of satire!" rejoined Lancaster, holding up a large golden flagon to hide his face from the earl. "Unhappy me, were this all the glory I could win. I will wipe away the stain, if stain there be, at Kildrummie, an be it not surrendered ere we reach it."

"The stain is with the base traitor Ross, not with thee or me," answered Hereford; "'tis that I abhor the nature of such expeditions, that I loathe, aye, loathe communication with such as he, and that—if it can be—that worse traitor Buchan; that makes me rejoice I have nought before me now but as fair a field as a siege may be. Would to God, this devastating and most cruel war were over, I do say! on a fair field it may be borne, but not to war with women and children, as has been my fate."

"Aye, by the way, this is not the first fair prize thou hast sent to Edward; the Countess of Buchan was a rare jewel for our coveting monarch—somewhat more than possession, there was room for vengeance there. Bore she her captivity more queenly than the sobbing and weeping Margaret?"

The question was reiterated by most of the knights around the dais, but Hereford evidently shrunk from the inquiry.

"Speak not of it, I charge ye," he said. "There is no room for jesting on grief as hers; majestic and glorious she was, but if the reported tale be true, her every thought, her every feeling was, as I even then imagined, swallowed up in one tearless and stern but all-engrossing anguish."

"The reported tale! meanest thou the fate of her son?" asked one of the knights.

"If it be true!" resumed another, "believest thou, my lord, there is aught of hope to prove it false?"

"More likely to be true than false," added Lancaster; "I can believe anything of that dark scowling villain Buchan—even the murder of his child."

"I believe it *not*," answered Hereford; "bad as that man is, hard in heart as in temper, he has too much policy to act thus, even if he had no feelings of nature rising to prevent it. No, no; I would wager the ruby brooch in my helmet that boy lives, and his father will make use of him to forward his own interests yet."

"But why then forge this tale?" demanded their host; "how may that serve his purpose?"

"Easily enough, with regard to the vengeance we all know he vowed to wreak on his unhappy wife. What deeper misery could he inflict upon her than the belief her boy was murdered? and as for its effect on Edward, trust a Comyn to make his own way clear."

"But what do with the boy meanwhile?"

"Keep him under lock and key; chained up, may be, as a dog in a kennel, till he has broken his high spirit, and moulds him to the tool he wills," answered Hereford, "or at least till his mother is out of his path."

"Ha! thinkest thou the king will demand such sweeping vengeance? He surely will not sentence a woman to death."

"Had I thought so, had I only dreamed so," replied Hereford, with almost startling sternness, "as there is a God above us, I would have risked the charge of treason and refused to give her up! But no, my lords, no; changed as Edward is, he would not, he dared not use his power thus. I meant but imprisonment, when I said out of the boy's path—more he will not do; but even such I love not. Bold as it was to crown the rebel Bruce, the deed sprung

from a noble heart, and noble deeds should meet with noble judgment."

A bugle sounded twice or thrice sharply without, and occasioning some bustle at the lower part of the hall, interrupted for a brief space the converse of the lords. A few minutes after, the seneschal, attended by two or three higher servants, returned, marshalling in due form two young men in the garb of esquires, followed by some fifteen or twenty men-at-arms.

"Ha! Fitz-Ernest and Hugo; well met, an ye bring us good tidings from Kildrummie," exclaimed both the English earls at once, as cap in hand the esquires slowly walked up the hall, and did obeisance to their masters.

"Yet your steps are somewhat laggard, an they bring us news of victory. By my troth, were it not utterly impossible, I could deem ye had been worsted in the strife," continued the impatient Lancaster, while the cooler and more sagacious Hereford scanned the countenances of the esquires in silence. "Yet and ye come not to tell of victory, why have ye come at all?"

"To beseech your lordship's speedy return to the camp," replied Fitz-Ernest, after a moment's hesitation, his cheek still flushed from his master's words. "There is division of purpose and action in the camp, and an ye not return and head the attack your noble selves, I fear me there is little hope of victory."

"Peace, fool! is there such skill and wisdom needed? Division in purpose and action. Quarrelling, methinks, had better be turned against the enemy than against yourselves. Hugo, do thou speak; in plain terms, wherefore come ye?"

"In plain terms, then, good my lord, as yet we have had the worst of it," answered the esquire, bluntly. "The Scotch fight like very devils, attacking us instead of waiting for our attack, penetrating into the very centre of our camp, one knows not how or whence, bearing off prisoners and booty in our very teeth."

"Prisoners—booty—worsted! Thou durst not tell me so!" exclaimed Lancaster, furiously, as he started up and half drew his sword.

"Peace, peace, I pray thee, good friend, peace," continued Hereford, laying his hand on Lancaster's shoulder,

with a force which compelled him to resume his seat. "Let us at least hear and understand their mission. Speak out, Hugo, and briefly—what has befallen?"

In a few straightforward words his esquire gave all the information which was needed, interrupted only now and then by a brief interrogation from Hereford, and some impatient starts and muttering from his colleague. The success of the Scots, described in a former page, had continued, despite the action of the mangonels and other engines which the massive walls appeared to hold in defiance. So watchful and skilful were the besieged, that the greatest havoc had been made amongst the men employed in working the engines, and not yet had even the palisades and barbican been successfully stormed.

"Have they tried any weaker point!" Hereford asked, and the answer was, that it was on this very matter division had spread amongst the knights, some insisting on carrying the barbican as the most important point, and others advising and declaring their only hope of success lay in a divided attack on two of the weaker sides at once.

"The fools, the sorry fools!" burst again from Lancaster. "They deserve to be worsted for their inordinate pride and folly; all wanted to lead, and none would follow. Give you good e'en, my lord," he added, turning hastily to his host; "I'll to the courtyard and muster forth my men. Fitz-Ernest, thou shalt speak on as we go," and drawing his furred mantle around him, he strode rapidly yet haughtily from the hall. Hereford only waited to learn all from Hugo, to hold a brief consultation with some of his attendant knights, and he too, despite the entreaties of his host to tarry with him at least till morning, left the banquet to don his armour.

"Silence and speed carry all before them, my good lord," he said, courteously. "In such a case, though I fear no eventual evil, they must not be neglected. I would change the mode of attack on these Scotch, ere they are even aware their foes are reinforced."

"Eventual evil, of a truth, there need not be, my lord," interposed his esquire, "even should no force of arms prevail. I have heard there are some within the walls who need but a golden bribe to do the work for us."

"Peace!" said the nobleman, sternly. "I loathe the

very word betray—spoken or intended. Shame, shame on thee to speak it, and yet more shame to imagine it needed ! Art thou of Norman birth, and deemest a handful of Scotch like these will bid us raise the siege and tamely depart ?—yet better so than gained by treachery.”

Hugo and the Scottish baron alike shrunk back from the reproving look of Hereford, and both silently followed him to the courtyard. Already it was a scene of bustling animation : trumpets were sounding and drums rolling ; torches flashing through the darkness on the mailed coats of the knights and on gleaming weapons ; and the heavy tramp of near two hundred horse, hastily accoutred and led from the stable, mingled with the hoarse winds of winter, howling tempestuously around. The reserve which Hereford had retained to guard the prisoners so treacherously delivered over to him, was composed of the noblest amidst his army, almost all mounted chevaliers ; and therefore, though he might not add much actual force to the besiegers, the military skill and experience which that little troop included argued ill for the besieged. Some of the heaviest engines he had kept back also, particularly a tower some four or five stories high, so constructed that it could be rolled to the walls, and its inmates ascend unscathed by the weapons of their defenders. Not imagining it would be needed, he had not sent it on with the main body, but now he commanded twelve of the strongest horses to be yoked to it, and on went the unwieldy engine, rumbling and staggering on its ill-formed wheels. Lancaster, whose impatience no advice could ever control, dashed on with the first troop, leaving his cooler comrade to look to the yoking of the engines and the marshalling the men, and with his own immediate attendants bringing up the rear, a task for which Hereford's self-command as well fitted him as his daring gallantry to head the foremost charge.

“Ye will have a rough journey, my good lord ; yet an ye deem it best, farewell and heaven speed ye,” was the parting greeting of the baron, as he stood beside the impatient charger of the earl.

“The rougher the better,” was that nobleman's reply ; “the noise of the wind would conceal our movements better than a calmer night. Farewell, and thanks—a soldier's

thanks, my lord, poor yet honest—for thy right noble welcome.”

He bent his head courteously, set spurs to his steed, and dashed over the drawbridge as the last of his men disappeared through the outer gate. The Scottish nobleman looked after him with many mingled feelings.

“As noble a warrior as ever breathed,” he muttered, “it were honour to serve under him, yet an he wants me not I will not join him. I love not the Bruce, yet uncalled, unneeded, I will not raise sword against my countrymen,” and with slow, unequal steps he returned to the hall.

Hereford was correct in his surmises. The pitchy darkness of a winter night would scarcely have sufficed to hide the movements attendant on the sudden arrival of a large body of men in the English camp, had not the hoarse artillery of the wind, moaning, sweeping, and then rushing o’er the hills with a crashing sound like thunder, completely smothered every other sound, and if at intervals of quiet unusual sounds did attract the ears of those eager watchers on the Scottish walls, the utter impossibility of kindling torches or fires in either camp frustrated every effort of discovery. Hoarser and wilder grew the whirlwind with the waning hours, till even the steel-clad men-at-arms stationed on the walls moved before it, and were compelled to crouch down till its violence had passed. Favoured by the elements, Hereford proceeded to execute his measures, heedless alike of the joyful surprise his sudden appearance occasioned, and of the tale of division and discord which Hugo and Fitz-Ernest had reported as destroying the unity of the camp. Briefly and sternly refusing audience to each who pressed forward, eager to exculpate himself at the expense of his companions, he desired his esquire to proclaim a general amnesty to all who allowed themselves to have been in error, and would henceforth implicitly obey his commands; he returned to his pavilion, with the Earl of Lancaster, summoning around him the veterans of the army, and a brief consultation was held. They informed him the greatest mischief had been occasioned by the injuries done to the engines, which had been brought to play against the walls. Stones of immense weight had been hurled upon them, materially injuring

their works, and attended with such fatal slaughter to the men who worked them, that even the bravest shrunk back appalled; that the advice of the senior officers had been to hold back until these engines were repaired, merely keeping strict guard against unexpected sallies on the part of the Scotch, as this would not only give them time to recruit their strength, but in all probability throw the besieged off their guard. Not above half of the army, however, agreed with this counsel; the younger and less wary spurned it as cowardice and folly, and rushing on to the attack, ill formed and ill conducted, had ever been beaten back with immense loss; defeat, however, instead of teaching prudence, lashed them into greater fury, which sometimes turned upon each other.

Hereford listened calmly, yet with deep attention, now and then indeed turning his expressive eyes towards his colleague, as if entreating him to observe that the mischief which had befallen them proceeded greatly from impetuosity and imprudence, and beseeching his forbearance. Nor was Lancaster regardless of this silent appeal; conscious of his equality with Hereford in bravery and nobleness, he disdained not to acknowledge his inferiority to him in that greater coolness, which in a siege is so much needed, and grasping his hand with generous fervour, bade him speak, advise, command, and he would find no one in the camp more ready to be counselled and to obey than Lancaster. To tear down those rebel colours and raise those of England in their stead, was all he asked.

"And fear not that task shall be other than thine own, my gallant friend," was Hereford's instant reply, his features kindling at Lancaster's words more than they had done yet; and then again quickly resuming his calm unimpassioned exterior, he inquired if the mangonels and other engines were again fit for use. There were several that could instantly be put in action, was the reply. Had the numbers of fighting men within the castle been ascertained? They had, a veteran answered, from a prisoner, who had appeared so willing to give information, that his captors imagined there were very many malcontents within the walls. Of stalwart fighting men there were scarcely more than three hundred; others there were, of whose number was the prisoner, who fought because their companions'

swords would else have been at their throats, but that they would be glad enough to be made prisoners, to escape the horrors of the siege.

"I am sorry for it," was the earl's sole rejoinder, "there will be less glory in the conquest."

"And this Sir Nigel Bruce, whoe'er he be, hath to combat 'gainst fearful odds," remarked Lancaster; "and these Scotchmen, by my troth, seem touched by the hoof of the arch-deceiver—treachery from the earl to the peasant. Hast noticed how this scion of the Bruce bears himself?—right gallantly, 'tis said."

"As a very devil, my lord," impetuously answered a knight; "in the walls or out of them, there's no standing before him. He sweeps down his foes, line after line, as cards blown before the wind; he is at the head of every charge, the last of each retreat. But yesternight there were those who marked him covering the retreat of his men absolutely alone; his sword struck down two at every sweep, till his passage was cleared; he darted on—the drawbridge trembled in its grooves—for he had given the command to raise it, despite his own danger—his charger, mad as himself, sprang forward, and like a lightning flash, both disappeared within the portcullis as the bridge uprose."

"Gallantly done!" exclaimed Lancaster, who had listened to this recital, almost breathlessly. "By St. George, a foe worthy to meet and struggle with! But who is he—what is he?"

"Knowest thou not?" said Hereford, surprised; "the brother, youngest brother I have heard, of this same daring Earl of Carrick who has so troubled our sovereign."

"Nigel, the brother of Robert! What, the scribe, the poet, the dreamer of Edward's court? a poor youth, with nought but his beauty to recommend him. By all good angels, this metamorphoses soundeth strangely! art sure 'tis the same, the very same?"

"I have heard so," was Hereford's quiet reply, and continuing his more important queries with the veterans around, while Lancaster, his gayer spirit roused by this account of Nigel, demanded every minute particular concerning him, that he might seek him hand to hand.

"Steel armour inlaid with silver—blue scarf across his breast, embroidered with his cognizance in gold—blue plume

which no English sword hath ever soiled—humph ! that's reserved for me—charger white as the snow on the ground—sits his steed as man and horse were one. Well, gloriously well, there will be no lack of glory here !” he said, joyously, as one by one he slowly enumerated the symbols by which he might recognise his foe. So expeditiously had Hereford conducted his well-arranged plans, that when his council was over, it still wanted two hours to dawn, and these Hereford commanded the men who had accompanied him to pass in repose.

But he himself partook not of this repose, passing the remainder of the darkness in carefully reviewing the forces which were still fresh and prepared for the onset, in examining the nature of the engines, and finally, still aided by the noise of the howling winds, marshalled them in formidable array in very front of the barbican, the heavy mist thrown onward by the blasts effectually concealing their near approach. To Lancaster the command of this party was intrusted ; Hereford reserving to himself the desirable yet delicate task of surveying the ground, confident that the attack on the barbican would demand the whole strength and attention of the besieged, and thus effectually cover his movements.

His plan succeeded. A fearful shout, seconded by a tremendous discharge of huge stones, some of which rattled against the massive walls in vain, others flying across the moat and crushing some of the men on the inner wall, were the first terrific sounds which unexpectedly greeted the aroused attention of the Scotch. The armour of their foes flashing through the mist, the furious charge of the knights up to the very gates of the barbican, seemingly in sterner and more compact array than of late had been their wont, the immense body which followed them, appearing in that dim light more numerous than reality, struck a momentary chill on the Scottish garrison ; but the unwonted emotion was speedily dissipated by the instant and unhesitating sally of Sir Christopher Seaton and his brave companions. The impetuosity of their charge, the suddenness of their appearance, despite their great disparity of numbers, caused the English a moment to bear back, and kept them in full play until Nigel and his men-at-arms, rushing over the lowered drawbridge, joined in the strife. A brief, very brief interval of fighting convinced both the Scottish

leaders that a master-spirit now headed their foes ; that they were struggling at infinitely greater odds than before ; that unity of purpose, greater sagacity, and military skill were now at work against them, they scarce knew wherefore, for they recognised the same war-cry, the same banners ; there were the same gallant show of knights, for in the desperate *mêlée* it was scarcely possible to distinguish the noble form of Lancaster from his fellows, although marking the azure plume, which even then waved high above all others, though round it the work of death ever waxed hottest ; the efforts of the English earl were all bent to meet its gallant wearer hand to hand, but the press of war still held them apart, though both seemed in every part of the field. It was a desperate struggle man to man ; the clash of swords became one strange continuous mass of sound, instead of the fearful distinctness which had marked their work before. Shouts and cries mingled fearfully with the sharper clang, the heavy fall of man and horse, the creaking of the engines, the wild shrieks of the victims within the walls mangled by the stones, or from the survivors who witnessed their fall—all formed a din as terrific to hear, as dreadful to behold. With even more than their wonted bravery the Scotch fought, but with less success. The charge of the English was no longer the impetuous fury of a few hot-headed young men, more eager to *despite* their cooler advisers, than gain any permanent good for themselves. Now, as one man fell another stepped forward in his place, and though the slaughter might have been equal, nay, greater on the side of the besiegers than the besieged, by one it was scarcely felt, by the other the death of each man was even as the loss of a host. Still, still they struggled on, the English obtaining possession of the palisades, though the immense strength of the barbican itself, defended as it was by the strenuous efforts of the Scotch, still resisted all attack ; bravely, nobly, the besieged retreated within their walls, pell-mell their foes dashed after them, and terrific was the combat on the drawbridge, which groaned and creaked beneath the heavy tramp of man and horse. Many, wrestling in the fierceness of mortal strife, fell together in the moat, and encumbered with heavy armour sunk, in each other's arms, in the grim clasp of death.

Then it was Lancaster met hand to hand the gallant foe he sought, covering the retreat of his men, who were bearing Sir Christopher Seaton, desperately wounded, to the castle. Sir Nigel stood well-nigh alone on the bridge; his bright armour, his foaming charger bore evident marks of the fray, but still he rode his steed firmly and unbent, his plume yet waved untouched by the foeman's sword. Nearer and nearer pressed forward the English earl, signing to his men to secure without wounding his gallant foe; round him they closely gathered, but Nigel evinced no sign either of trepidation or anger, fearlessly, gallantly, he returned the earl's impetuous charge, backing his steed slowly as he did so, and keeping his full front to his foe. On, on pressed Lancaster, even to the postern; a bound, a shout, and scarcely was he aware that his sword had ceased to cross with Nigel's, before he was startled by the heavy fall of the portcullis, effectually dividing them, and utterly frustrating further pursuit. A cry of rage, of disappointment broke from the English, as they were compelled to turn and rejoin their friends.

The strife still continued within and without the barbican, and ended without much advantage on either side. The palisades and outward barriers had indeed fallen into the hands of the English, which was the first serious loss yet sustained by the besieged; from the barbican they had gallantly and successfully driven their foe, but that trifling success was so counterbalanced by the serious loss of life amid the garrison which it included, that both Nigel and Sir Christopher felt the next attack must deliver it into the hands of the besiegers. Their loss of men was in reality scarcely a third of the number which had fallen among the English, yet to them that loss was of infinitely more consequence than to the foe. Bitter and painful emotions filled the noble spirit of Nigel, as he gazed on the diminished number of his men, and met the ill-suppressed groans and lamentations of those who had, at the first alarm of the English, sought shelter and protection in the castle; their ill-suppressed entreaties that he would struggle no longer against such odds grated harshly and ominously on his ear; but sternly he turned from them to the men-at-arms, and in their steadfast bravery and joyous acclamations found some degree of hope.

Yet ere the day closed the besieged felt too truly their dreams of triumph, of final success, little short of a miracle would realize. Their fancy that some new and mightier spirit of generalship was at work within the English camp was confirmed. Two distinct bodies were observed at work on the eastern and southern sides of the mount, the one evidently employed in turning aside the bed of the river, which on that side flowed instead of the moat beneath the wall, the other in endeavouring to fill up the moat by a causeway, so as to admit of an easy access to the outer wall. The progress they had made in their work the first day, while the attention of the Scotch had been confined to the attack on the barbican, was all-sufficient evidence of their intent ; and with bitter sorrow Sir Nigel and his brother-in-law felt that their only means of any efficient defence lay in resigning the long-contested barbican to the besiegers. An important point it certainly was, but still to retain it the walls overlooking the more silent efforts of the English must be left comparatively unguarded, and they might obtain an almost uninterrupted and scarce-contested passage within the walls, while the whole strength and attention of the besieged were employed, as had already been the case, on a point that they had scarce a hope eventually to retain. With a deep and bitter sorrow the alternative was proposed and carried in a hurried council of war, and so well acted upon, that, despite the extreme watchfulness of the English, men, treasure, arms and artillery, all that the strong towers contained, were conveyed at dead of night over the draw-bridge into the castle, and the following morning, Lancaster, in utter astonishment, took possession of the deserted fort.

Perhaps to both parties this resolution was alike a disappointment and restraint. The English felt there was no glory in their prize, they had not obtained possession through their own prowess and skill ; and now that the siege had become so much closer, and this point of communication was entirely stopped, the hand-to-hand combat, the glorious *mêlée*, the press of war, which to both parties had been an excitement, and little more than warlike recreation, had of course entirely ceased, but Hereford heeded not the disappointment of his men ; his plans were progressing as he had desired, even though his workmen were greatly

harassed by the continued discharge of arrows and immense stones from the walls.

The desertion of the barbican was an all-convincing proof of the very small number of the garrison ; and though the immense thickness and solidity of the walls bespoke time, patience, and control, the English earl never wavered from his purpose, and by his firmness, his personal gallantry, his readily-bestowed approbation on all who demanded it, he contrived to keep his more impatient followers steadily to their task ; while Nigel, to prevent the spirits of his men from sinking, would frequently lead them forth at night, and by a sudden attack annoy and often cut off many of the men stationed within the barbican. The drawbridge was the precarious ground of many a midnight strife, till the daring gallantry of Nigel Bruce became the theme of every tongue ; a gallantry equalled only by the consummate skill which he displayed, in retreating within his entrenchments frequently without the loss of a single man either as killed or wounded. Often would Sir Christopher Seaton, whose wounds still bound him a most unwilling prisoner to his couch, entreat him to avoid such rash exposures of his life, but Nigel only answered him with a smile and an assurance he bore a charmed life, which the sword of the foe could not touch.

The siege had now lasted six weeks, and the position of both parties continued much as we have seen, save that the bed of the river had now begun to appear, promising a free passage to the English on the eastern side, and on the south a broad causeway had stretched itself over the moat, on which the towers for defending the ascent of the walls, mangonels and other engines, were already safely bestowed, and all promised fair for the besiegers, whose numerous forces scarcely appeared to have suffered any diminution, although in reality some hundreds had fallen ; while on the side of the besieged, although the walls were still most gallantly manned, and the first efforts of the English to scale the walls had been rendered ineffectual by huge stones hurled down upon them, still a look of greater care was observable on the brows of both officers and men ; and provisions had now begun to be doled out by weight and measure, for though the granaries still possessed stores sufficient for some weeks longer, the apparent determination of the

English to permit no relaxation in their close attack, demanded increase of caution on the part of the besieged.

About this time an event occurred, which though comparatively trifling in itself, when the lives of so many were concerned, was fraught in effect with fatal consequences to all the inmates of Kildrummie. The conversation of the next chapter, however, will better explain it, and to it we refer our readers.

CHAPTER XIX.

IN a circular apartment of the lower floor in Kildrummie keep, its stone floor but ill-covered with rushes, and the walls hung with the darkest and rudest arras, Sir Christopher Seaton reclined on a rough couch, in earnest converse with his brother-in-law Nigel. Lady Seaton was also within the chamber, at some little distance from the knights, engaged in preparing lint and healing ointments, with the aid of an attendant, for the wounded, and ready at the first call to rise and attend them, as she had done unremittingly during the continuance of the siege. The countenances of both warriors were slightly changed from the last time we beheld them. The severity of his wounds had shed a cast almost of age on the noble features of Seaton, but care and deep regret had mingled with that pallor; and perhaps on the face of Nigel, which three short weeks before had beamed forth such radiant hope, the change was more painful. He had escaped with but slight flesh wounds, but disappointment and anxiety were now vividly impressed on his features; the smooth brow would unconsciously wrinkle in deep and unexpressed thought; the lip, to which love, joy, and hope alone had once seemed natural, now often compressed, and his eye flashed, till his whole countenance seemed stern, not with the sternness of a tyrannical, changed and chafing mood—no, 'twas the sternness most fearful to behold in youth, of thought, deep, bitter, whelming thought; and sterner even than it had been yet was the expression on his features as he spoke this day with Seaton.

"He must die," were the words which broke a long and

anxious pause, and fell in deep yet emphatic tones from the lips of Seaton; "yes, die! Perchance the example may best arrest the spreading contagion of treachery around us."

"I know not, I fear not; yet as thou sayest he must die," replied Nigel, speaking as in deep thought, "would that the noble enemy, who thus scorned to benefit by the offered treason, had done on him the work of death himself. I love not the necessity nor the deed."

"Yet it must be, Nigel. Is there aught else save death, the death of a traitor, which can sufficiently chastise a crime like this? Well was it the knave craved speech of Hereford himself. I marvel whether the majesty of England had resisted a like temptation."

"Seaton, he would not," answered the young man. "I knew him, aye, studied him in his own court, and though I doubt not there was a time when chivalry was strongest in the breast of Edward, it was before ambition's fatal poison had corroded his heart. Now he would deem all things honourable in the art of war, aye, even the delivery of a castle through the treachery of a knave."

"And he hath more in yon host to think with him than with the noble Hereford," resumed Sir Christopher; "yet this is but idle parley, and concerneth but little our present task. In what temper do our men receive the tidings of this foul treason?"

"Our own brave fellows call aloud for vengeance on the traitor; nay, had I not rescued him from their hands, they would have torn him limb from limb in their rage. But there are others, Seaton—alas! the more numerous body now—and they speak not, but with moody brows and gloomy mutterings prowl up and down the courts."

"Aye, the coward hearts," answered Seaton, "their good wishes went with him, and but low-breathed curses follow our efforts for their freedom. Yes, it must be, if it be but as a warning unto others. See to it, Nigel; an hour before the set of sun he dies."

A brief pause followed his words, whose low sternness of tone betrayed far more than the syllables themselves. Both warriors remained awhile plunged in moody thought, which Seaton was the first to break.

"And how went the last attack and defence?" he asked; "they told me, bravely."

"Aye, so bravely, that could we but reinforce our fighting men, aided as we are by impenetrable walls, we might dream still of conquest; they have gained little as yet, despite their nearer approach. Hand to hand we have indeed struggled on the walls, and hurled back our foremost foes in their own entrenchments. Our huge fragments of rocks have dealt destruction on one of their towers, crushing all who manned it beneath the ruins."

"And I lie here, when such brave work is going on beside me, even as a bed-ridden monk or coward layman, when my whole soul is in the fight," said the knight, bitterly, and half springing from his couch. "When will these open wounds—to the foul fiend with them and those who gave them!—when will they let me mount and ride again as best befits a warrior? Better slain at once, than lie here a burden, not a help, taking from those whose gallant efforts need it more, the food we may not have for long. I will not thus be chained; I'll to the action, be my life the forfeit!"

He sprung up, and for a moment stood upon his feet, but with a low groan of pain instantly fell back, the dew of weakness gathering on his brow. Lady Seaton was at his side on the instant, to bathe his temples and his hands, yet without one reproachful word, for she knew the anguish it was to his brave heart to lie thus disabled, when every loyal hand was needed for his country.

"Nigel, I would that I might join thee. Remember, 'tis no mean game we play; we hold not out as marauding chieftains against a lawful king; we struggle not in defence of petty rights, of doubtful privileges. 'Tis for Scotland, for King Robert still we strive. Did this castle hold out, aye, compel the foe to raise the siege, much, much would be done for Scotland. Others would do as we have done; many, whose strongholds rest in English hands, would rise and expel the foe. Had we but reinforcements of men and stores, all might still be well."

"Aye," answered Nigel, bitterly, "but with all Scotland crushed 'neath English chains, her king and his bold patriots fugitives and exiles, ourselves the only Scottish force in arms, the only Scottish castle which resists the tyrant, how may this be, whence may come increase of force, of store? Seaton, Seaton, thine are bright dreams, would that they were real."

"Wouldst thou then give up at once, and strive no more? It cannot be."

"Never!" answered his companion, passionately. "Ere English feet shall cross these courts, and English colours wave above these towers, the blood of the defenders must flow beneath their steps. They gain not a yard of earth, save at the bright sword's point; not a rood of grass unstained by Scottish blood. Give up! not till my arm can wield no sword, my voice no more shout Forward for the Bruce!"

"Then we will hope on, dream on, Nigel, and despair not," replied Seaton, in the same earnest tone. "We know not yet what may be, and improbable as it seems now, succours may yet arrive. How long dost last the truce?"

"For eighteen hours, two of which have passed."

"Didst thou demand it?"

"No," replied Nigel. "It was proffered by the earl, as needed for a strict examination of the traitor Evan Roy, and accepted in the spirit with which it was offered."

"Thou didst well; and the foul traitor—where hast thou lodged him?"

"In the western turret, strongly guarded. I would not seek thy counsel until I had examined and knew the truth."

"And thine own judgment?"

"Was as thine. It is an ill necessity, yet it must be."

"Didst pronounce his sentence?"

Nigel answered in the affirmative.

"And how was it received?"

"In the same sullen silence on the part of the criminal as he had borne during his examination. Methought a low murmur of discontent escaped from some within the hall, but it was drowned in the shout of approbation from the men-at-arms, and the execrations they lavished on the traitor, as they bore him away, so I heeded it not."

"But thou wilt heed it," said a sweet voice beside him, and Agnes, who had just entered the chamber, laid her hand on his arm, and looked beseechingly in his face. "Dearest Nigel, I come a pleader."

"And for whom, my beloved?" he asked, his countenance changing into its own soft beautiful expression as he gazed on her. "What can mine Agnes ask that Nigel may not grant?"

"Nay, I am no pleader for myself," she said; "I come on the part of a wretched wife and aged mother, beseeching the gift of life."

"And for a traitor, Agnes?"

"I think of him but as a husband and son, dearest Nigel," she said, more timidly, for his voice was stern. "They tell me he is condemned to death, and his wretched wife and mother besought my influence with thee; and indeed it needed little entreaty, for when death is so busy around us, when in this fearful war we see the best and bravest of our friends fall victims every day, oh, I would beseech you to spare life when it may be. Dearest, dearest Nigel, have mercy on this wretched man; traitor as he is, oh, do not take his life; do not let thy lips sentence him to death. Wilt thou not be merciful?"

"If the death of one man will preserve the lives of many, how may that one be spared?" said Sir Nigel, folding the sweet pleader closer to him, though his features spoke no relaxation in his purpose. "Sweet Agnes, do not ask this, give me not the bitter pain of refusing aught to thee. Thou knowest not all the mischief and misery which pardon to a traitor such as this will do; thou listenest only to thy kind heart and the sad pleadings of those who love this man. Now, listen to me, beloved, and judge thyself. Did I believe a pardon would bring back the traitor to a sense of duty, to a consciousness of his great crime—did I believe giving life to him would deter others from the same guilt, I should scarce wait even for thy sweet pleading to give him both liberty and life; but I know him better than thou, mine Agnes. He is one of those dark, discontented, rebellious spirits, that never rest in stirring up others to be like them; who would employ even the life I gave him to my own destruction and that of the brave and faithful soldiers with me."

"But send him hence, dearest Nigel," still entreated Agnes. "Give him life, but send him from the castle; will not this remove the danger of his influence with others?"

"And give him field and scope to betray us yet again, sweet one. It were indeed scorning the honourable counsel of Hereford to act thus; for trust me, Agnes, there are not many amid our foes would resist temptation as he hath done."

"Yet would not keeping him close prisoner serve thee as well as death, Nigel? bethink thee, would it not spare the ill of taking life?"

"Dearest, no," he answered. "There are many, alas! too many within these walls, who need an example of terror to keep them to their duty. They will see that treachery avails not with the noble Hereford, and that, discovered by me, it hath no escape from death. If this man be, as I imagine, in league with other contentious spirits—for he could scarce hope to betray the castle into the hands of the English without some aid within—his fate may strike such terror into other traitor hearts, that their designs will be abandoned. Trust me, dearest, I do not do this deed of justice without deep regret; I grieve for the necessity even as the deed, and yet it must be; and bitter as it is to refuse thee aught, indeed I cannot grant thy boon."

"Yet hear me once more, Nigel. Simple and ignorant as I am, I cannot answer such arguments as thine; yet may it not be that this deed of justice, even while it strikes terror, may also excite the desire for revenge, and situated as we are, were it not better to avoid all such bitterness, such heart-burnings amongst the people?"

"We must brave it, dearest," answered Nigel, firmly. "The direct line of justice and of duty may not be turned aside for such fears as these."

"Nor do I think they have foundation," continued Sir Christopher Seaton. "Thou hast pleaded well and kindly, gentle maiden, yet gladly as we would do aught to please thee, this that thou hast asked, alas! must not be. The crime itself demands punishment, and even could we pardon that, duty to our country, our king, ourselves, calls loudly for his death, lest his foul treachery should spread."

The eyes of the maiden filled with tears.

"Then my last hope is over," she said, sadly. "I looked to thy influence, Sir Christopher, to plead for me, even if mine own supplications should fail; and thou judgest even as Nigel, not as my heart could wish."

"We judge as men and soldiers, gentle maiden; as men who, charged with a most solemn responsibility, dare listen to nought save the voice of justice, however loudly mercy pleads."

"And didst thou think, mine Agnes, if thy pleading

was of no avail, the entreaty of others could move me?" whispered Nigel, in a voice which, though tender, was reproachful. "Dearest and best, oh, thou knowest not the pang it is to refuse thee even this, and to feel my words have filled those eyes with tears. Say thou wilt not deem me cruel, abiding by justice when there is room for mercy."

"I know thee better than to judge thee thus," answered Agnes, tearfully; "the voice of duty must have spoken loudly to urge thee to this decision, and I may not dispute it; yet would that death could be averted. There was madness in that woman's eyes," and she shuddered as she spoke.

"Of whom speakest thou, love?" Nigel asked, and Seaton looked the question.

"Of his wife," she replied. "She came to me distracted, and used such dreadful words, menaces and threats they seemed; but his mother, more composed, assured me they meant nothing, they were but the ravings of distress, and yet I fear to look on her again without his pardon."

"And thou shalt not, my beloved; these are not scenes and words for such as thee. Rest here with Christine and good Sir Christopher; to tend and cheer a wounded knight is a fitter task for thee, sweet one, than thus to plead a traitor's cause."

Pressing his lips upon her brow as he spoke, he placed her gently on a settle by Sir Christopher, then crossing the apartment, he paused a moment to whisper to Lady Seaton.

"Look to her, my dear sister; she has been terrified, though she would conceal it. Let her not leave thee till this fatal duty is accomplished."

Lady Seaton assured him of her compliance, and he left the apartment.

He had scarcely quitted the postern before he himself encountered Jean Roy, a woman who, even in her mildest moments, evinced very little appearance of sanity, and who now, from her furious and distracting gestures, seemed wrought up to no ordinary pitch of madness. She kept hovering round him, uttering menaces and entreaties in one and the same breath, declaring one moment that her husband was no traitor, and had only done what every true-hearted Scotsman ought to do, if he would save himself and

those he loved from destruction ; the next, piteously acknowledging his crime, and wildly beseeching mercy. For a while Nigel endeavoured, calmly and soothingly, to reason with her, but it was of no avail : louder and fiercer became her curses and imprecations, beseeching heaven to hurl down all its maledictions upon him and the woman he loved, and refuse him mercy when he most needed it. Perceiving her violence becoming more and more outrageous, Nigel placed her in charge of two of his men-at-arms, desiring them to treat her kindly, but not to lose sight of her, and keep her as far as possible from the scene about to be enacted. She was dragged away, struggling furiously, and Nigel felt his heart sink heavier within him. It was not that he wavered in his opinion, that he believed, situated as he was, it was better to spare the traitor's life than excite to a flame the already aroused and angered populace. He thought indeed terror might do much ; but whether it was the entreating words of Agnes, or the state of the unhappy Jean, there had come upon him a dim sense of impending ill ; an impression that the act of justice about to be performed would bring matters to a crisis, and the ruin of the garrison be consummated, ere he was aware it had begun. The shadow of the future appeared to have enfolded him, but still he wavered not. The hours sped : his preparations were completed, and at the time appointed by Seaton, with as much of awful solemnity as circumstances would admit, the soul of the traitor was launched into eternity. Men, women, and children had gathered round the temporary scaffold ; every one within the castle, save the maimed and wounded, thronged to that centre court, and cheers and shouts, and groans and curses, mingled strangely on the air.

Clad in complete steel, but bare-headed, Sir Nigel Bruce had witnessed the act of justice his voice had pronounced, and, after a brief pause, he stood forward on the scaffold, and in a deep, rich voice addressed the multitude ere they separated. Eloquently, forcibly, he spoke of the guilt, the foul guilt of treachery, now when Scotland demanded all men to join together hand and heart as one, now when the foe was at their gates ; when, if united, they might yet bid defiance to the tyrant, who, if they were defeated, would hold them slaves. He addressed them as Scottish men and free men, as soldiers, husbands and fathers, as children

of the brave, who welcomed death with joy, rather than life in slavery and degradation; and when his words elicited a shout of exultation and applause from the greater number, he turned his eye on the group of malcontents, and sternly and terribly bade them beware of a fate similar to that which they had just witnessed; for the gallant Earl of Hereford, he said, would deal with all Scottish traitors as with Evan Roy, and once known as traitors within the castle walls, he need not speak their doom, for they had witnessed it; and then changing his tone, frankly and beseechingly he conjured them to awake from the dull, sluggish sleep of indifference and fear, to put forth their energies as men, as warriors; their country, their king, their families called on them, and would they not hear? He bade them arise, awake to their duty, and all that had been should never be recalled. He spoke with a brief yet mighty eloquence that seemed to carry conviction with it. Many a stern face and darkened brow relaxed, and there was hope in many a patriot breast as that group dispersed, and all was once more martial bustle on the walls.

"Well and wisely hast thou spoken, my son," said the aged Abbot of Scone, who had attended the criminal's last moments, and now, with Nigel, sought the keep. "Thy words have moved those rebellious spirits, have calmed the rising tempest even as oil flung on the troubled waves; thine eloquence was even as an angel's voice 'mid muttering fiends. Yet thou art still sad, still anxious. My son, this should not be."

"It *must* be, father," answered the young man. "I have looked beyond that oily surface and see nought save darker storms and fiercer tempests; those spirits need somewhat more than a mere voice. Father, reproach me not as mistrusting the gracious heaven in whose keeping lie our earthly fates. I know the battle is not to the strong, 'tis with the united, the faithful, and those men are neither. My words have stirred them for the moment, as a pebble flung 'mid the troubled waters—a few brief instants and all trace is passed, we see nought but the blackened wave. But speak not of these things; my trust is higher than earth, and let man work his will."

Another week passed, and the fierce struggle continued,

alternating success, one day with the besiegers, the next with the besieged. The scene of action was now principally on the walls—a fearful field, for there was no retreat—and often the combatants, entwined in a deadly struggle, fell together into the moat. Still there were no signs of wavering on either side, still did the massive walls give no sign of yielding to the tremendous and continued discharge of heavy stones, that against battlements less strongly constructed must long ere this have dealt destruction and inevitable mischief to the besieged. One tower, commanding the causeway across the moat and its adjoining platform on the wall, had indeed been taken by the English, and was to them a decided advantage, but still their farther progress even to the next tower was lingering and dubious, and it appeared evident to both parties that, from the utter impossibility of the Scotch obtaining supplies of provision and men, success must finally attend the English; they would succeed more by the effects of famine than by their swords.

It was, as we have said, seven days after the execution of the traitor Roy. A truce for twelve hours had been concluded with the English, at the request of Sir Nigel Bruce, and safe conduct granted by the Earl of Hereford to those men, women, and children of the adjoining villages who chose even at this hour to leave the castle, but few, very few took advantage of this permission, and these were mostly the widows and children of those who had fallen in the siege; a fact which caused some surprise, as the officers and men-at-arms imagined it would have been eagerly seized upon by all those contentious spirits who had appeared so desirous of a league with England. A quiet smile slightly curled the lips of Nigel as this information was reported to him, a smile as of a mind prepared for and not surprised at what he heard; but when left alone, the smile was gone, he folded his arms on his breast, his head was slightly bent forward, but had there been any present to have remarked him, they would have seen his features move and work with the intensity of internal emotion. Some mighty struggle he was enduring; something there was passing at his very heart, for when recalled from that trance by the heavy bell of the adjoining church chiming the hour of five, and he looked up, there were large drops of moisture on his brow, and his

beautiful eye seemed for the moment strained and bloodshot. He paced the chamber slowly and pensively till there was no outward mark of agitation, and then he sought for Agnes.

She was alone in the upper chamber of the keep, looking out from the narrow casement on a scene of hill and vale, and water, which, though still wintry from the total absence of leaf and flower, was yet calm and beautiful in the declining sun, and undisturbed by the fearful scenes and sounds which met the glance and ear on every other side, seemed even as a paradise of peace. It had been one of those mild, soft days of February, still more rare in Scotland than in England, and on the heart and sinking frame of Agnes its influence had fallen, till, almost unconsciously, she wept. The step of Nigel caused her hastily to dash these tears aside, and as he stood by her and silently folded his arm around her, she looked up in his face with a smile. He sought to return it, but the sight of such emotion, trifling as it was, caused his heart to sink with indescribable fear; his lip quivered, as utterly to prevent the words he sought to speak, and as he clasped her to his bosom and bent his head on hers, a low yet instantly suppressed moan burst from him.

"Nigel, dearest Nigel, what has chanced? Oh, speak to me!" she exclaimed, clasping his hand in both hers, and gazing wildly in his face. "Thou art wounded or ill, or wearied unto death. Oh, let me undo this heavy armour, dearest; seek but a brief interval of rest. Speak to me, I know thou art not well."

"It is but folly, my beloved, a momentary pang that weakness caused. Indeed, thy fears are causeless; I am well, quite well," he answered, struggling with himself, and subduing with an effort his emotion. "Mine own Agnes, thou wilt not doubt me; look not upon me so tearfully, 'tis passed, 'tis over now."

"And thou wilt not tell me that which caused it, Nigel? Hast thou aught of suffering which thou fearest to tell thine Agnes? Oh! do not fear it; weak, childlike as I am, my soul will find strength for it."

And thou shalt know all, all in a brief while," he said, her sweet pleading voice rendering the task of calmness more difficult. "Yet tell me first thy thoughts, my

love. Methought thy gaze was on yon peaceful landscape as I entered, and yet thine eyes were dimmed with tears."

"And yet I know not wherefore," she replied, "save the yearnings for peace were stronger, deeper than they should be, and I pictured a cot where love might dwell in yon calm valley, and wished that this fierce strife was o'er."

"'Tis in truth no scene for thee, mine own. I know, I feel thou pinest for freedom, for the fresh, pure, stainless air of the mountain, the valley's holy calm; thine ear is sick with the fell sounds that burst upon it; thine eyes must turn in loathing from this fierce strife. Agnes, mine own Agnes, is it not so? would it not be happiness, aye, heaven's own bliss, to seek some peaceful home far, far away from this?"

He spoke hurriedly and more passionately than was his wont, but Agnes only answered—

"With thee, Nigel, it were bliss indeed."

"With me," he said; "and couldst thou not be happy were I not at thy side? Listen to me, beloved," and his voice became as solemnly earnest as it had previously been hurried. "I sought thee, armed I thought with fortitude sufficient for the task; sought thee, to beseech, implore thee to seek safety and peace for a brief while apart from me, till these fearful scenes are passed. Start not, and oh, do not look upon me thus. I know all that strength of nerve, of soul, which bids thee care not for the dangers round thee. I know that where I am thy loving spirit feels no fear; but oh, Agnes, for my sake, if not for thine own, consent to fly ere it be too late; consent to seek safety far from this fatal tower. Let me not feel that on thee, on thee, far dearer than my life, destruction, and misery, and suffering in a thousand fearful shapes may fall. Let me but feel thee safe, far from this terrible scene, and then, come what will, it can have no pang."

"And thee," murmured the startled girl, on whose ear the words of Nigel had fallen as with scarce half their meaning, "thee, wouldst thou bid me leave thee, to strive on, suffer on, and oh, merciful heaven! perchance fall *alone*? Nigel, Nigel, how may this be? are we not one, only one, and how may I dwell in safety without thee—how mayest thou suffer without me?"

"Dearest and best!" he answered, passionately, "oh, that we were indeed one; that the voice of heaven had bound us one, long long ere this! and yet—no, no, 'tis better thus," and again he struggled with emotion, and spoke calmly. "Agnes, beloved, precious as thou art in these hours of anxiety, dear, dearer than ever, in thy clinging, changeless love, yet tempt me not selfishly to retain thee by my side, when liberty, and life, and joy await thee beyond these fated walls. Thy path is secured; all that can assist, can accelerate thy flight waits but thy approval. The dress of a minstrel boy is procured, and will completely conceal and guard thee through the English camp. Our faithful friend, the minstrel seer, will be thy guide, and lead thee to a home of peace and safety, until my brother's happier fortune dawns; he will guard and love thee for thine own and for my sake. Speak to me, beloved; thou knowest this good old man, and I so trust him that I have no fear for thee. Oh, do not pause, and ere this truce be over let me, let me feel that thou art safe and free, and may in time be happy."

"In time," she repeated slowly, as if to herself, and then, rousing herself from that stupor of emotion, looked up with a countenance on which a sudden glow had spread. "And why hast thou so suddenly resolved on this?" she asked, calmly; "why shouldst thou fear for me more now than hitherto, dearest Nigel? Hath not the danger always been the same, and yet thou ne'er hast breathed of parting? are not thy hopes the same—what hath chanced unknown to me, that thou speakest and lookest thus? tell me, ere thou urgest more."

"I will tell thee what I fear, my love," he answered, reassured by her firmness; "much that is seen not, guessed not by my comrades. They were satisfied that my appeal had had its effect, and the execution of Evan Roy was attended with no disturbances, no ill will amongst those supposed to be of his party—nay, that terror did its work, and all ideas of treachery which might have been before encouraged were dismissed. I, too, believed this, Agnes, for a while; but a few brief hours were sufficient to prove the utter fallacy of the dream. Some secret conspiracy is, I am convinced, carrying on within these very walls. I know and feel this, and yet so cautious, so secret are their

movements, whatever they may be, that I cannot guard against them. There are, as thou knowest, fewer true fighting men amongst us than any other class, and these are needed to man the walls and guard against the foe without; they may not be spared to watch as spies their comrades—nay, I dare not even breathe such thoughts, lest their bold hearts should faint and fail, and they too demand surrender ere evil come upon us from within. What will be that evil I know not, and therefore cannot guard against it. I dare not employ these men upon the walls, I dare not bring them out against the foe, for so bitterly do I mistrust them, I should fear even then they would betray us. I only know that evil awaits us, and therefore, my beloved, I do beseech thee, tarry not till it be upon us; depart while thy path is free.”

“Yet if they sought safety and peace, if they tire of this warfare,” she replied, disregarding his last words, “wherefore not depart to-day, when egress was permitted; bethink thee, dearest Nigel, is not this proof thy fears are ill founded, and that no farther ill hangs over us than that which threatens from without?”

“Alas! no,” he said, “it but confirms my suspicions; I obtained this safe conduct expressly to nullify or confirm them. Had they departed as I wished, all would have been well; but they linger, and I can feel their plans are maturing, and therefore they will not depart. Oh, Agnes,” he continued, bitterly, “my very soul is crushed beneath this weight of unexpressed anxiety and care. Had I but to contend with our English foe, but to fight a good and honourable fight, to struggle on, conscious that to the last gasp the brave inmates of this fortress would follow me, and Edward would find nought on which to wreak his vengeance but the dead bodies of his foes, my task were easy as ’twere glorious; but to be conscious of secret brooding evil each morn that rises, each night that falls, to dread what yet I know not, to see, perchance, my brave fellows whelmed, chained, through a base treachery impossible to guard against—oh! Agnes, ’tis this I fear.”

“Yet have they not seemed more willing, more active in their assigned tasks since the execution of their comrade,” continued Agnes, with all a woman’s gentle artifice, still

seeking to impart hope, even when she felt that none remained ; “ may it not be that, in reality, they repent them of former traitorous designs, and remain behind to aid thee to the last ? Thou sayest that palpable proof of this brooding evil thou canst not find, then do not heed its voice. Let no fear of me, of my safety, add its pang ; mine own Nigel, indeed I fear them not.”

“ I know that all I urge will nought avail with thee, beloved,” he answered, somewhat less agitated. “ I know thy gentle love is all too deep, too pure, too strong, to share my fears for thee, and oh, I bless thee, bless thee for the sweet solace of that faithful love ! yet, yet, I may not listen to thy wishes. All that thou sayest is but confirmation of the brooding evil ; they are active, willing, but to hide their dark designs. Yet even were there not this evil to dread, no dream of treachery, still, still, I would send thee hence, sweet one. Famine and blood, and chains, and death—oh, no, no ! thou must not stay for these.”

“ And whither wouldst thou send me, Nigel, and for what ?” she asked, still calmly, though her quivering lip denoted that self-possession was fast failing. “ Why ?”

“ Whither ? to safety, freedom, peace, my best beloved !” he answered, fervently ; “ for what ? that happier, brighter days may beam for thee, that thou mayest live to bless and be a blessing ; dearest, best, cling not to a withered stem, thou mayest be happy yet.”

“ And wilt thou join me, if I seek this home of safety, Nigel ?” she laid her hand on his arm, and fixed her eyes unflinchingly upon his face. He could not meet that glance, a cold shudder passed over his frame ere he could reply.

“ Mine own Agnes,” and even then he paused, for his quivering lip could not give utterance to his thoughts, and a minute rolled in that deep stillness, and still those anxious eyes moved not from his face. At length voice returned, and it was sad yet deeply solemn, “ Our lives rest not in our own hands,” he said ; “ and who when they part may look to meet again ? Beloved, if life be spared, canst doubt that I will join thee ? yet, situated as I am, governor of a castle about to fall, a patriot, and a Bruce, brother to the noble spirit who wears our country’s crown, and has

dared to fling down defiance to a tyrant, Agnes, mine own Agnes, how may I dream of life? I would send thee hence ere that fatal moment come; I would spare thee this deep woe. I would bid thee live, beloved, live till years had shed sweet peace upon thy heart, and thou wert happy once again."

There was a moment's pause; the features of Agnes had become convulsed with agony as Nigel spoke, and her hands had closed with fearful pressure on his arm, but his last words, spoken in his own rich, thrilling voice, called back the stagnant blood.

"No, no; I will not leave thee!" she sobbed forth, as from the sudden failing of strength in every limb she sunk kneeling at his feet. "Nigel, Nigel, I will not leave thee; in life or in death I will abide by thee. Force me not from thee; seek not to tempt me by the tale of safety, freedom, peace; thou knowest not the depth, the might of woman's love, if thou thinkest things like these can weigh aught with her, even if chains and death stood frowningly beside. I will not leave thee; whom have I beside thee, for whom else wouldst thou call on me to live? Alone, alone, utterly alone, save *thee*! Wilt thou bid me hence, and leave thee to meet thy fate alone—thee, to whom my mother gave me—thee, without whom my very life is nought? Nigel, oh, despise me not for these wild words, unmaidenly as they sound; oh, let me speak them, or my heart will break!"

"Despise thee for these blessed words!" Nigel answered, passionately, as he raised her from the ground, and clasped her to his heart. "Oh, thou knowest not the bliss they give; yet, yet would I speak of parting, implore thee still to leave me, aye, though in that parting my very heartstrings snap. Agnes, how may I bear to see thee in the power of the foe, perchance insulted, persecuted, tortured with the ribald admiration of the rude crowd, and feel I have no power to save thee, no claim to bind thee to my side. What are the mere chains of love in such an hour, abiding by me, as thou mightest, till our last hope is over, and English colours wave above this fortress—then, dearest, oh, must we not, shall we not be rudely parted?"

"No, no! Who shall dare to part us?" she said, as she clung sobbing to his breast. "Who shall dare to do

this thing, and say I may not tend thee, follow thee, even until death?"

"Who? our captors, dearest. Thinkest thou they will heed thy tender love, thine anguish? will they have hearts for aught save for thy loveliness, sweet one? Think, think of terrors like to this, and oh, still wilt thou refuse to fly?"

"But thy sister, the Lady Seaton, Nigel, doth she not stay, doth she not brave these perils?" asked Agnes, shuddering at her lover's words, yet clinging to him still. "If she escape such evil, why, oh, why may not I?"

"She is Seaton's wife, sweet one, bound to him by the voice of heaven, by the holiest of ties; the noble knights who head our foes will protect her in all honourable keeping; but for thee, Agnes, even if the ills I dread be as nought, there is yet one I have dared not name, lest it should pain thee, yet one that is most probable as 'tis most fearful; thou canst not hide thy name, and as a daughter of Buchan, oh, will they not give thee to a father's keeping?"

"The murderer of my brother—my mother's gaoler! Oh, Nigel, Nigel, to look on him were more than death!" she wildly exclaimed. "Yet, yet once known as Agnes of Buchan, this will, this must be; but leave thee now, leave thee to a tyrant's doom, if indeed, indeed thou fallest in his hands—leave thee, when faithful love and woman's tenderness are more than ever needed—leave thee for a fear like this, no, no, I will not. Nigel, I will rest with thee. Speak not, answer not; give me one short moment, and then—oh, all the ills may be averted by one brief word—and I, oh, can I speak it?" She paused in fearful agitation, and every limb shook as if she must have fallen; the blood rushed up to cheek, and brow, and neck, as, fixing her beautiful eyes on Nigel's face, she said, in a low yet thrilling voice, "Let the voice of heaven hallow the vows we have so often spoken, Nigel. Give me a right, a sacred right to bear thy name, to be thine own, at the altar's foot, by the holy abbot's blessing. Let us pledge our troth, and then let what will come, no man can part us. I am thine, only thine!"

Without waiting for a reply, she buried her face in his bosom, and Nigel could feel her heart throb as if 'twould

burst its bounds, her frame quiver as if the torrent of blood, checked and stayed to give strength for the effort, now rushed back with such overwhelming force through its varied channels as to threaten life itself.

"Agnes, my own noble, self-devoted love! oh, how may I answer thee?" he cried, tears of strong emotion coursing down his cheek—tears, and the warrior felt no shame. "How have I been deserving of love like this—how may I repay it? how bless thee for such words? Mine own, mine own! this would indeed guard thee from the most dreaded ills; yet how may I link that self-devoted heart to one whose thread of life is well-nigh spun? how may I make thee mine, when a few brief weeks of misery and horror must part us, and on earth, for ever?"

"No, no; thou knowest not all a wife may do, my Nigel," she said, as she raised her head from his bosom, and faintly smiled, though her frame still shook; "how she may plead even with a tyrant, and find mercy; or if this fail, how she may open iron gates and break through bonds, till freedom may be found. Oh, no, we shall not wed to part, beloved; but live and yet be happy, doubt it not; and then, oh, then forget the words that joined us, made us one, had birth from other lips than thine;—thou wilt forget, forgive this, Nigel?"

"Forget—forgive! that to thy pure, unselfish soul I owe the bliss which e'en at this hour I feel," he answered, passionately kissing the beautiful brow upturned to his: "forget words that have proved—had I needed proof—how purely, nobly, faithfully I am beloved; how utterly, how wholly thou hast forgotten all of self for me. No, no! were thy words proved true, might I indeed live blessed with thee the life allotted man, each year, each month I would recall this hour, and bless thee for its love. But oh, it may not be!" and his voice so suddenly lost its impassionate fervour, that the breast of Agnes filled with new alarm. "Dearest, best! thou must not dream of life, of happiness with me. I may not mock thee with such blessed, but, alas! delusive hopes; my doom hath gone forth, revealed when I knew it not, confirmed by that visioned seer but a few short weeks ago. Agnes, my noble Agnes, wherefore shouldst thou wed with death? I know that I must die!"

The solemn earnestness of his words chased the still lingering glow from the lips and cheek of the maiden, and a cold shiver passed through her frame, but still she clung to him, and said—

“It matters not; my maiden love, my maiden troth is pledged to thee—in life or in death I am thine alone. I will not leave thee,” she said, firmly and calmly. “Nigel, if it be indeed as thou sayest, that affliction, and—and all thou hast spoken, must befall thee, the more need is there for the sustaining and the soothing comfort of a woman’s love. Fear not for me, weak as I may have seemed, there is yet a spirit in me worthy of thy love. I will not unman thee for all thou mayest encounter. No, even if I follow thee to—to death, it shall be as a Bruce’s wife. Ask not how I will contrive to abide by thee undiscovered, when, if it must be, the foe is triumphant; it will take time, and we have none to lose. Thou hast promised to forget all I have urged, all, save my love for thee; then, oh, fear me not, doubt me not, thine Agnes will not fail thee!”

Nigel gazed at her almost with surprise; she was no longer the gentle timid being who but a few minutes since had clung weeping to his bosom as a child. She was indeed very pale, and on her features was the stillness of marble; but she stood erect and unfaltering in her innocent loveliness, sustained by that mighty spirit which dwelt within. An emotion of deep reverence took possession of that warrior heart, and unable to resist the impulse, he bent his knee before her.

“Then let it be so,” he said, solemnly, but oh, how fervently. “I will not torture mine own heart and thine by conjuring thee to fly; and now, here, at thy feet, Agnes, noble, generous being, let me swear solemnly, sacredly swear, that should life be preserved to me longer than I now dream of, should I indeed be spared to lavish on thee all a husband’s love and care, never, never shalt thou have cause to regret this day! to mourn thy faithful love was shown as it hath been—to weep the hour that, in the midst of danger, and darkness, and woe, hath joined our earthly fates, and made us one. And now,” he continued, rising and folding her once more in his arms, “wilt thou meet me at the altar ere the truce concludes? ’tis but a brief while, a

very brief while, my love ; yet if it can be, I know thou wilt not shrink."

"I will not," she answered. "The hour thou namest I will meet thee. Lady Seaton," she added, slightly faltering, and the vivid blush rose to her temples, "I would see her, speak with her ; yet—"

"She shall come to thee, mine own, prepared to love and hail thee sister, as she hath long done. She will not blame thee, dearest ; she loves, hath loved too faithfully herself. Fear not, I will leave nought for thee to tell that can bid that cheek glow as it doth now. She, too, will bless thee for thy love."

He imprinted a fervent kiss on her cheek, and hastily left her. Agnes remained standing as he had left her for several minutes, her hands tightly clasped, her whole soul speaking in her beautiful features, and then she sunk on her knees before a rudely-carved image of the Virgin and child, and prayed long and fervently. She did not weep, her spirit had been too painfully excited for such relief, but so wrapt was she in devotion, she knew not that Lady Seaton, with a countenance beaming in admiration and love, stood beside her, till she spoke.

"Rouse thee, my gentle one," she said, tenderly, as she twined her arm caressingly around her ; "I may not let thee linger longer even here, for time passes only too quickly, and I shall have but little time to attire my beautiful bride for the altar. Nigel hath been telling such a tale of woman's love, that my good lord hath vowed, despite his weakness and his wounds, none else shall lead thee to the altar, and give thee to my brother, save himself. I knew that not even Nigel's influence would bid thee leave us, dearest," she continued, as Agnes hid her face in her bosom, "but I dreamed not such a spirit dwelt within this childlike heart, sweet one ; thy lot must surely be for joy !"

CHAPTER XX.

It was something past the hour of nine, when Agnes, leaning on the arm of Sir Christopher Seaton, and followed by Lady Seaton and two young girls, their attendants, entered the church, and walked, with an unfaltering step and firm though modest mien, up to the altar, beside which Nigel already stood. She was robed entirely in white, without the smallest ornament save the emerald clasp which secured, and the beautiful pearl embroidery which adorned her girdle. Her mantle was of white silk, its little hood thrown back, disclosing a rich lining of the white fox fur. Lady Seaton had simply arranged her hair in its own beautiful curls, and not a flower or gem peeped through them; a silver bodkin secured the veil, which was just sufficiently transparent to permit her betrothed to look upon her features and feel that, pale and still as they were, they evinced no change in her generous purpose. He, too, was pale, for he felt those rites yet more impressively holy than he had deemed them, even when his dreams had pictured them peculiarly and solemnly holy; for he looked not to a continuance of life and happiness, he felt not that ceremony set its seal upon joy, and bound it, as far as mortality might hope, for ever on their hearts. He was conscious only of the deep unutterable fulness of that gentle being's love, of the bright, beautiful lustre with which it shone upon his path. The emotion of his young and ardent breast was perhaps almost too holy, too condensed, to be termed joy; but it was one so powerful, so blessed, that all of earth and earthly care was lost before it. The fears and doubts which he had so lately felt, for the time completely faded from his memory. That there were foes without and yet darker foes within he might have known perhaps, but at that moment they did not occupy a fleeting thought. He had changed his dress for one of richness suited to his rank, and though at the advice of his friends he still retained the breastplate and some other parts of his armour, his doublet of azure velvet, cut and slashed with white satin, and his long, flowing mantle lined with sable, and so richly decorated with silver stars that its colour could scarcely be distinguished,

removed all appearance of a martial costume, and well became the graceful figure they adorned ; two of the oldest knights and four other officers, all as gaily attired as the hurry of the moment would permit, had at his own request attended him to the altar.

Much surprise this sudden intention had indeed caused, but it was an excitement, a change from the dull routine of the siege, and consequently welcomed with joy, many indeed believing Sir Nigel had requested the truce for the purpose. Sir Christopher, too, though pale and gaunt, and compelled to use the support of a cane in walking, was observed to look upon his youthful charge with all his former hilarity of mien, chastened by a kindly tenderness, which seemed indeed that of the father whom he personated ; and Lady Seaton had donned a richer garb than was her wont, and stood encouragingly beside the bride. About twenty men-at-arms, their armour and weapons hastily burnished, that no unseemly soil should mar the peaceful nature of the ceremony by recalling thoughts of war, were ranged on either side. The church was lighted, dimly in the nave and aisles, but softly and somewhat with a holy radiance where the youthful couple knelt, from the large waxen tapers burning in their silver stands upon the altar.

The Abbot of Scone was at his post, attended by the domestic chaplain of Kildrummie ; there was a strange mixture of admiration and anxiety on the old man's face, but Agnes saw it not ; she saw nothing save him at whose side she knelt.

Nigel, even in the agitation of mind in which he had quitted Agnes—an agitation scarcely conquered in hastily informing his sister and her husband of all that had passed between them, and imploring their countenance and aid—yet made it his first care strictly to make the round of the walls, to notice all that might be passing within the courts, and see that the men-at-arms were at their posts. In consequence of the truce, for the conclusion of which it still wanted some little time, there were fewer men on the walls than usual, their commanders having desired them to take advantage of this brief cessation of hostilities and seek refreshment and rest. A trumpet was to sound at the hour of ten, half an hour before the truce concluded, to summon them again to their posts. The men most acute in pene-

tration, most steady and firm in purpose, Nigel selected as sentries along the walls; the post of each being one of the round towers we have mentioned, the remaining spaces were consequently clear. Night had already fallen, and anxiously observing the movements on the walls, endeavouring to discover whether the various little groups of men and women in the ballium meant anything more than usual, Sir Nigel did not notice various piles or stacks of straw and wood which were raised against the wall in many parts where the shadows lay darkest, and some also against the other granaries which were contained in low, wooden buildings projecting from the wall. Neither he nor his friends, nor even the men-at-arms noticed them, or if they did, imagined them in the darkness to be but the stones and other weights generally collected there, and used to supply the engines on the walls.

With the exception of the sentries and the men employed by Nigel, all the garrison had assembled in the hall of the keep for their evening meal, the recollection of whose frugality they determined to banish by the jest and song; there were in consequence none about the courts, and therefore that dark forms were continually hovering about beneath the deep shadows of the walls, increasing the size of the stacks, remained wholly undiscovered.

Agnes had entered the church by a covered passage, which united the keep to its inner wall, and thence by a gallery through the wall itself, dimly lighted by loopholes, to the edifice, whose southern side was formed by this same wall. It was, therefore, though in reality situated within the ballium or outer court, nearer by many hundred yards to the dwelling of the baron than to the castle walls, its granaries, towers, etc. This outer ballium indeed was a very large space, giving the appearance of a closely-built village or town, from the number of low wooden and thatch-roofed dwellings, which on either side of the large open space before the great gate were congregated together. This account may, we fear at such a moment, seem somewhat out of place, but events in the sequel compel us to be thus particular. A space about half a mile square surrounded the church, and this position, when visited by Sir Nigel at nine o'clock, was quiet and deserted, indeed there was very much less confusion and other evidences of dis-

quiet within the dwellings than was now usual, and this circumstance perhaps heightened the calm which, as we have said, had settled on Sir Nigel's mind.

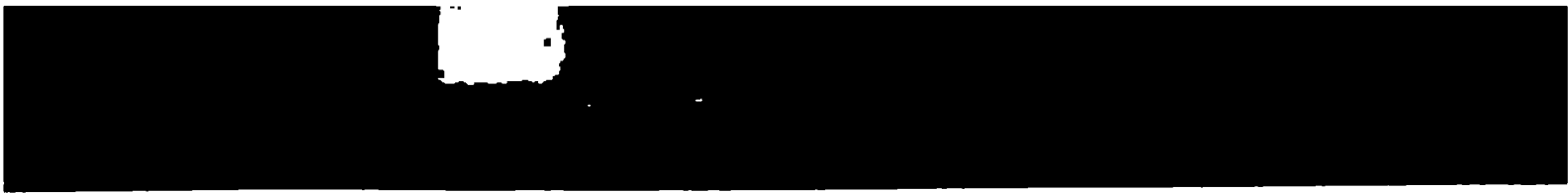
There was silence within that little sacred edifice, the silence of emotion ; for not one could gaze upon that young fair girl, could think of that devoted spirit, which at such a time preferred to unite her fate with a beloved one than seek safety and freedom in flight, without being conscious of a strange swelling of the heart and unwonted moisture in the eye, and there was that in the expression of the beautiful features of Nigel Bruce, none could remark unmoved ; he was so young, so gifted, so strangely uniting the gift of the sage, the poet, with the glorious achievements of the most perfect knight, that he had bound himself alike to every heart, however varied their dispositions, however opposite their tastes, and there was not one, from the holy Abbot of Scone to the lowest and rudest of the men-at-arms, who would not willingly, aye, joyfully have laid down life for his, have gladly accepted chains to give him freedom.

The deep, sonorous voice of the abbot audibly faltered as he commenced the sacred service, and looked on the fair beings kneeling, in the beauty and freshness of their youth, before him. Accustomed, however, to control every human emotion, he speedily recovered himself, and uninterruptedly the ceremony continued. Modestly, yet with a voice that never faltered, Agnes made the required responses, and so deep was the stillness that reigned around not a word was lost, but sweetly and clearly as a silver clarion it sunk on every ear and thrilled to every heart ; to his who knelt beside her, as if each tone revealed yet more the devoted love which led her there. Towards the conclusion of the service, and just as every one within the church knelt in general prayer, a faint yet suffocating odour, borne on what appeared a light mist, was distinguished, and occasioned some slight surprise ; by the group around the altar, however, it was unnoticed, and the men-at-arms, on looking towards the narrow windows and perceiving nothing but the intense darkness of the night, hushed the rising exclamation, and continued in devotion. Two of the knights, too, were observed to glance somewhat uneasily around, still nothing was perceivable but the light wreaths of vapour penetrating

through the northern aisle and dissolving ere long the arches of the roof. Almost unconsciously they listened, and became aware of some sounds in the distance, but so faint and indefinable as to permit them to rest in the belief that it must be the men-at-arms hurrying from the keep to the walls, although they were certain the trumpet had not yet sounded. Determined not to heed such vague sounds, they looked again to the altar; the abbot had laid a trembling hand on either low bent head, and was emphatically pronouncing his blessing on their vows, calling on heaven in its mercy to bless and keep them, and spare them to each other for a long and happy life, or if it must be that an union commenced in danger should end in sorrow, to keep them still and fit them for an union in eternity. His words were few but earnest, and for the first time the lip of Agnes was observed to quiver—they were ONE. Agnes was clasped to the heart of her husband; she heard him call her his own, his wife—that man should never part them more. The voice of congratulation woke around her, but ere either could gaze around to look their thanks or clasp the eagerly-proffered hand, a cry of alarm, of horror, ran through the building. A red, lurid light, impossible to be mistaken, illumined every window, as from a fearful conflagration without; darkness had fled before it. On all sides it was light, light the most horrible, the most awful, though perchance the most fascinating the eye can behold; fearful shouts and cries and the rush of many feet, mingled with the now easily distinguished roar of the devouring element, burst confusedly on the ear. A minute sufficed to fling open the door of the church for knights and men-at-arms to rush forth in one indiscriminate mass. Sir Christopher would have followed them, utterly regardless of his inability, had not his wife clung to him imploringly, and effectually restrained him. The abbot, grasping the silver crosier by his side, with a swift yet still majestic stride, made his way through the church, and vanished by the widely-opened door. Agnes and Sir Nigel stood comparatively alone; not a cry, not a word passed her lips, every feature was wrapped in one absorbing look upon her husband. He had clasped his hands convulsively together, his brow was knit, his lip compressed, his eye fixed and rigid, though it gazed on vacancy.

"It hath fallen, it hath fallen!" he muttered. "Fool, fool that I was, never to dream of this! friends, followers, all I hold most dear, swallowed up in this fell swoop! God of mercy! how may it be borne? and thou, thou," he added, in increased agony, roused from that stupor by the wild shouts of "Sir Nigel, Sir Nigel! where is he? Why does he tarry in such an hour?" that rung shrilly on the air. "Agnes, mine own, it is not too late even now to fly. Ha! son of Dermid, in good time thou art here; save her, in mercy, save her! I know not when, or how, or where we may meet again, I may not tarry here." He clasped her in his arms, imprinted an impassioned kiss on her now deathlike cheek, placed her at once in the arms of the seer (who, robed as a minstrel, had stood concealed behind a projecting pillar during the ceremony, and now approached), and darted wildly from the church. What a scene met his gaze: all the buildings within the ballium, with the sole exception of the church, were in one vivid blaze of fire, the old dry wood and thatch of which they were composed kindling with a mere spark; the wind blew the flames in the direction of the principal wall, which was already ignited from the heaps of combustibles that had been raised within for the purpose, although it was likely that, from its extreme thickness and strength, the fire had there done but partial evil, had not the conflagration within the court spread faster and nearer every moment, and from the blazing rafters and large masses of thatch caught by the wind and hurled on the very wall, done greater and more irreparable mischief than the combustibles themselves. Up, up, seeming to the very heavens, the lurid flames ascended, blazing and roaring, and lighting the whole scene as with the glare of day. Fantastic wreaths of red fire danced in the air against the pitchy blackness of the heavens, rising and falling in such graceful yet terrible shapes, that the very eye felt riveted in admiration while the heart quailed with horror. Backwards and forwards gleamed the forms of men in the dusky glare; and oaths and cries, and the clang of swords, and the shrieks of women, terrified by the destruction they had not a little assisted to ignite—the sudden rush of horses bursting from their stables and flying here and there, scared by the unusual sight and horrid sounds—the hissing streams of water which, thrown from huge buckets on the flames,





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seemed but to excite them to greater fury instead of lessening their devouring way—the crackling of straw and wood, as of the roar of a hundred furnaces—these were the varied sounds and sights that burst upon the eye and ear of Nigel as, richly attired as he was, his drawn sword in his hand, his fair hair thrown back from his uncovered brow and head, he stood in the very centre of the scene. One glance sufficed to perceive that the rage of the men-at-arms was turned on their treacherous countrymen; that the work of war raged even then, the swords of Scotsmen were raised against each other. Even women fell in that fierce slaughter, for the demon of revenge was at work, and sought but blood. In vain the holy abbot, heedless that one sudden gust and his flowing garments must inevitably catch fire, uplifted his crosier and called on them to forbear; in vain the officers rushed amidst the infuriated men, bidding them keep their weapons and their lives for the foe, who in such a moment would assuredly be upon them—in vain they commanded, exhorted, implored; but on a sudden, the voice of Sir Nigel Bruce was heard above the tumult, loud, stern, commanding; his form was seen hurrying from group to group, turning back with his own sword the weapons of his men, giving life even to those who had wrought this woe, and there was a sudden hush, a sudden pause.

“Peace, peace!” he cried. “Would ye all share the madness of these men? They have hurled down destruction, let them reap it; let them live to thrive and fatten in their chains; let them feel the yoke they pine for. For us, my friends and fellow-soldiers, let us not meet our glorious fate with the blood of Scotsmen on our swords; we have striven for our country, we have striven gloriously, faithfully, and now we have but to *die* for her. Ha! do I speak in vain? Again—back, coward! wouldst thou slay a woman?” and with a sudden bound he stood beside one of the soldiers, who was in the act of plunging his dagger in the breast of a kneeling and struggling female; one moment sufficed to wrench the dagger from his grasp, and release the woman from his hold.

“It is ill done, your lordship; it is the fiend, the arch-fiend that has planned it all!” loudly exclaimed the man. “She has been heard to mutter threats of vengeance and blood and fire against thee, and all belonging to thee. Let her not go free, my lord, thou mayest repent it still.”

"Repent giving a woman life—bah! Thou art a fool, though a faithful one," answered Sir Nigel, but even he started as he recognised the features of Jean Roy. She gave him no time to restrain her, however, for sliding from his hold, she bounded several paces from him, singing, as she did so, "Repent, ye shall repent! where is thy buxom bride? Jean Roy will see to her safety. A bonny courtship ye shall have!" Tossing up her arms wildly, she vanished as she spoke, seeming in that light in very truth more like a fiend than woman. A chill sunk on the heart of Nigel, but, "No, no," he said, internally, as again he sought the spot where confusion and horror waxed thickest; "Dermid will care for Agnes and guard her. I will not think of that mad woman's words." Yet even as he rushed onwards, giving directions, commands, lending his aid to every effort made for extinguishing the fire, a prayer for his wife was uttered in his heart.

The fire continued its rapid progress, buttress after buttress, tower after tower caught on the walls, causing the conflagration to continue, even when, by the most strenuous efforts, it had been partially extinguished amongst the dwellings of the court. The wind blowing from the north fortunately preserved the keep, inner wall, and even the church, uninjured, save that the scorched and blackened sides of the latter gave evidence of the close vicinity of the flames, and how narrowly it had escaped. With saddened hearts, the noble defenders of Scotland's last remaining bulwark beheld their impregnable wall, the scene of such dauntless valour, such unconquered struggles, against which the whole force of their mighty foes had been of no avail—that wall crumbling into dust and ashes in their very sight, opening a broad passage to the English foe. Yet still there was no evidence that to yield were preferable than to die; still, though well-nigh exhausted with their herculean efforts to quench the flames, there was no cessation, no pause, although the very height of the wall prevented success, for they had not the facilities afforded by the engines of the present day. Sir Nigel, his knights, nay, the venerable abbot himself, seconded every effort of the men. It seemed as if little more could add to the horror of the scene, and yet the shouts of "the granaries, the granaries—merciful heaven, all is consumed!" came with such appalling consciousness on every ear, that for a

brief while the stoutest arm hung powerless, the firmest spirit quailed. Famine stood suddenly before them as a gaunt, terrific spectre, whose cold hand it seemed had grasped their very hearts. Nobles and men, knights and soldiers, alike stood paralysed, gazing at each other with a blank, dim, unutterable despair. The shrill blast of many trumpets, the roll of heavy drums broke that deep stillness. "The foe! the foe?" was echoed round, fiercely, yet rejoicingly. "They are upon us—they brave the flames—well done! Now firm and steady; to your arms, stand close. Sound trumpets—the defiance, the Bruce and Scotland!" and sharply and clearly, as if but just arrayed for battle, as if nought had chanced to bend those gallant spirits to the earth, the Scottish clarions sent back their answering blast, and the men gathered in compact array around their gallant leader.

"My horse—my horse!" shouted Nigel Bruce, as he sprung from rank to rank of the little phalanx, urging, commanding, entreating them to make one last stand, and fall as befitted Scottish patriots. The keep and inner ballium was still their own as a place of retreat, however short a period it might remain so. A brave defence, a glorious death would still do much for Scotland.

Shouts, cheers, blessings on his name awoke in answer, as unfalteringly, as bravely as those of the advancing foes. Prancing, neighing, rearing, the superb charger was at length brought to the dauntless leader.

"Not thus, my lord; in heaven's name, do not mount thus, unarmed, bareheaded as thou art!" exclaimed several voices, and two or three of his esquires crowded round him. "Retire but for a brief space within the church."

"And turn my back upon my foes, Hubert; not for worlds! No, no; bring me the greaves, gauntlets, and helmet here, if thou wilt, and an they give me time, I will arm me in their very teeth. Haste ye, my friends, if ye will have it so; for myself these garments would serve me well enough;" but ere he ceased to speak they had flown to obey, and returned ere a dozen more of the English had made their way across the crumbling wall. Coolly, composedly, Nigel threw aside his mantle and doublet, and permitted his esquires to assist in arming him, speaking at the

same time in a tone so utterly unconcerned, that ere their task was finished, his coolness had extended unto them. He had allowed some few of the English to make an unmolested way; his own men were drawn up in close lines against the inner wall, so deep in shadow that they were at first unobserved by the English. He could perceive by the still clear light of the flames, troop after troop of the besiegers were marching forward in the direction both of the causeway and the river; several were plunging in the moat, sword in hand, and attack threatened on every side. He waited no longer; springing on his charger, with a movement so sudden and unexpected, the helmet fell from his esquire's hand, and waving his sword above his undefended head, he shouted aloud his war-cry, and dashed on, followed by his men, to the spot where a large body of his foes already stood.

Desperately they struggled, most gallantly they fought; man after man of the English fell before them. On, on they struggled; a path seemed cleared before them; the English were bearing back, despite their continued reinforcements from the troops, that so thronged the causeway it appeared but one mass of men. But other shouts rent the air. The besiegers now poured in on every side; wherever that gallant body turned they were met by English. On, on they came, fresh from some hours of repose, buoyed up by the certainty of conquest; unnumbered swords and spears and coats of mail gleaming in that lurid light; on came the fiery steeds, urged by the spur and rein, till through the very flames they bore their masters; on through the waters of the moat, up the scorching ruins, and with a sound as of thunder, clearing with a single bound all obstacles, into the very court. It was a fearful sight, that little patriot band, hemmed in on every side, yet struggling to the last, clearing a free passage through men and horse, and glancing swords and closing multitudes, nearing the church, slowly yet surely forming in yet closer order as they advanced; there, there they stood, as a single bark amid the troubled waves, cleaving them asunder, but to close again in fatal fury on her track.

In vain amid that furious strife did the Earl of Lancaster seek out the azure plume and golden helmet that marked the foe he still desired to meet; there was indeed a face, beautiful

and glorious even in that moment, ever in the very thickest of the fight, alike the front, the centre, the rear-guard of his men; there was indeed that stately form, sitting his noble charger as if horse and man were one; and that unhelmed brow, that beautifully-formed head, with its long curls streaming in the night wind, which towered unharmed, unbent, above his foes, and where that was, the last hope of his country had gathered. The open door of the church was gained, and there the Scottish patriots made a stand, defended in their rear by the building. A brief and desperate struggle partially cleared their foes, and ere those in the rear could press forward, the besieged had disappeared, and the heavy doors were closed. The sudden pause of astonishment amidst the assailants was speedily dispelled by the heavy blows of axes and hatchets, the sudden shout "To the wall! to the wall!" while several ran to plant scaling-ladders and mount the inner barrier, left unhappily unguarded from the diminished numbers of the Scotch; there, however, their progress was impeded, for the space which that wall enclosed being scarce half the size of the balium, and the barrier itself uninjured, they were repulsed with loss from within. The church-doors meanwhile had given way, and permitted ingress to the assailants, but the door leading to the passage through the inner wall, and by which in reality the Scotch had effected their retreat, was carefully closed and barred within, and had so completely the same appearance as the wall of the church in which it stood, that the English gazed round them fairly puzzled and amazed.

This movement, however, on the part of the besieged occasioned a brief cessation of hostilities on both sides. The flames had subsided, except here and there, where the passing wind fanned the red hot embers anew into life, and caused a flickering radiance to pass athwart the pitchy darkness of the night, and over the bustling scene on either side the ruins.

There was no moon, and Hereford imagined the hours of darkness might be better employed in active measure for resuming the attack by dawn than continuing it then. Much, very much had been gained: a very brief struggle more he knew must now decide it, and he hoped, though against his better judgment, that the garrison would sur-

render without further loss of blood. Terms he could not propose, none at least that could prevail on the brave commanders to give up with life, and so great was the admiration Nigel's conduct had occasioned, that this true son of chivalry ardently wished he would eventually fall in combat rather than be consigned to the fearful fate which he knew would be inflicted on him by the commands of Edward. Commands to the troops without were forwarded by trusty esquires; the wounded conveyed to the camp, and their places supplied by fresh forces, who, with the joyous sound of trumpet and drum, marched over by torch-light into the ballium, so long the coveted object of their attack.

Sir Nigel meanwhile had desired his exhausted men to lie down in their arms, ready to start up at the faintest appearance of renewed hostility, and utterly worn out, they most willingly obeyed. But the young knight himself neither shared nor sought for that repose; he stood against a buttress on the walls, leaning on a tall spear, and gazing at once upon his wearied followers, and keeping a strict watch on the movements of his foes. A tall form, clothed in complete armour, suddenly stood beside him; he started.

"Seaton!" he said; "thou here, and in armour?"

"Aye," answered the knight, his voice from very weakness sounding hollow in his helmet. "Aye, to make one last stand, and, if it may be, die as I have lived for Scotland. I have strength to strike one last blow, for last it will be—all is lost!"

A low groan broke from Nigel's lips, but he made no farther answer than the utterance of one word—"Agnes!"

"Is safe, I trust," rejoined the knight. "The son of Dermid, in whose arms I last saw her, knoweth many a secret path and hidden passage, and can make his way wherever his will may lead."

"How! thinkest thou he will preserve her, save her even now from the foe?"

"Aye, perchance conceal her till the castle be dismantled. But what do they now? See, a herald and white flag," he added, abruptly, as by the light of several torches a trumpeter, banner-bearer, herald, and five men-at-arms were discerned approaching the walls.

"What would ye? Halt, and answer," demanded Sir

Nigel, recalled on the instant to his sterner duties, and advancing, spear in hand, to the utmost verge of the wall.

"We demand speech of Sir Nigel Bruce and Sir Christopher Seaton, governors of this castle," was the brief reply.

"Speak on, then, we are before ye, ready to list your say. What would your lords?"

"Give ye not admittance within the wall?" inquired the herald; "'tis somewhat strange parleying without."

"No!" answered Nigel, briefly and sternly; "speak on, and quickly. We doubt not the honour of the noble Earl of Hereford, it hath been too gloriously proved; but we are here to list your mission. What would ye?"

"That ye surrender this fortress by to-morrow's dawn, and strive no longer with the destiny against you. Ye have neither men nor stores, and in all good and chivalric feeling, the noble Earls of Hereford and Lancaster call on ye to surrender without further loss of blood."

"And if we do this?" demanded Nigel.

"They promise all honourable treatment and lenient captivity to the leaders of the rebels, until the pleasure of his grace the king be known; protection to all females; liberty to those whose rank demands not their detention; and for the common soldiers, on the delivery of their arms and upper garments, and their taking a solemn oath that within seven days they will leave Scotland never to return, liberty and life shall be mercifully extended unto one and all."

"And if we do *not* this?"

"Your blood be upon your own rebellious heads! Sacking and pillage must take their course."

"Ye have heard," were the sole words that passed the lips of Nigel, turning to his men, who, roused by the first sound of the trumpet, had started from their slumbers, and falling in a semicircle round him and Sir Christopher, listened with intense eagerness to the herald's words. "Ye have heard. Speak, then—your answer; yours shall be ours."

"Death! death! death!" was the universally reiterated shout. "We will struggle to the death. Our king and country shall not say we deserted them because we feared to die; or surrendered on terms of shame as these! No, let the foe come on! we will die, if we may not live, still patriots

of Scotland ! King Robert will avenge us ! God save the Bruce ?”

Again and yet again they bade God bless him ; and startling and thrillingly was the united voice of that desperate, devoted band borne on the wings of night to the very farthest tents of their foes. Calmly, Sir Nigel turned again to the herald.

“Thou hast Scotland’s answer,” he said ; “’tis in such men as these her glorious spirit lives ! they will fall not unavenged. Commend us to your masters ; we await them with the dawn,” and turning on his heel, he reassumed the posture of thought as if he had never been aroused.

The dawn uprose, the attack was renewed with increased vigour, and defended with the same calm, determined spirit which had been ever shown ; the patriots fell where they fought, leaving fearful traces of their desperate courage in the numbers of English that surrounded each. It was now before the principal entrance to the keep they made their final stand, and horrible was the loss of life, fierce and deadly the strife, ere that entrance was forced, and the shrieks of women and children within proclaimed the triumph of the foe. Then came a shout, loud ringing, joyous, echoed and re-echoed by the blast of the trumpets both within and without, and the proud banner of Scotland was hurled contemptuously to the earth, and the flag of England floated in its place. Many a dying eye, unclosed by those sudden sounds, looked on that emblem of defeat and moved not in life again ; others sprung up to their feet with wild shrieks of defiance, and fell back, powerless, in death.

Sir Christopher Seaton, whose exhausted frame could barely sustain the weight of his armour, had been taken in the first charge, fighting bravely, but falling from exhaustion to the earth. And where was Nigel ? hemmed in on all sides, yet seemingly unwounded, unconquered still, his face indeed was deadly pale, and there were moments when his strokes flagged as from an utter failing of strength ; but if, on observing this, his foes pressed closer, strength appeared to return, and still, still he struggled on. He sought for death, he felt that he dared his destiny, but death shunned him ; he strove with his destiny in vain. Not thus might

he fall, the young, the generous, the gifted. On foot, his armour hacked and stained with blood, not yet had the word "yield" been shouted in his ear.

"Back, back! leave me this glorious prize!" shouted Lancaster, spurring on his charger through the crowd, and leaping from him the instant he neared the spot where Nigel stood. "Take heed of my gallant horse, I need him not—I shall not need him now. Ha! bareheaded too; well, so shall it be with me—hand to hand, foot to foot. Turn, noble Nigel, we are well-nigh equals now, and none shall come between us." He hastily unclasped his helmet, threw it from his brow, and stood in the attitude of defence.

One moment Sir Nigel paused, his closing foes had fallen from him at the words of their leader; he hesitated one brief instant, as to whether indeed he should struggle more, or deliver up his sword to the generous earl, when the shout of triumph from the topmost turret, proclaiming the raising of the banner, fell upon his ear, and nerved him to the onset.

"Noble and generous!" he exclaimed, as their swords crossed. "Might I choose my fate, I would fall by thy knightly sword."

As stupified with wonder at the skill, the extraordinary velocity and power of the combatants, the men-at-arms stood round, without making one movement to leave the spot; and fearful indeed was that deadly strife; equal they seemed in stature, in the use of their weapons, in every mystery of the sword; the eye ached with the rapid flashing of the blades, the ear tired of the sharp, unwavering clash, but still they quailed not, moved not from the spot where the combat had commenced.

How long this fearful struggle would have continued, or who would finally be victor was undecided still, when suddenly the wild mocking laugh of madness sounded in the very ear of Nigel, and a voice shouted aloud, "Fight on, my bonny lord; see, see, how I care for your winsome bride," and the maniac form of Jean Roy rushed by through the thickest ranks of the men, swift, swift as the lightning track. A veil of silver tissue floated from her shoulder, and she seemed to be bearing something in her arms, but what, the rapidity of her way precluded all discovery. The fierce soldiers shrunk away from her, as if appalled by her gaunt,

spectral look, or too much scared by her sudden appearance to attempt detaining her. The eye of Nigel involuntarily turned from his foe to follow her; he recognised the veil, and fancy did the rest. He saw her near a part of the wall which was tottering beneath the engines of the English, there was a wild shriek in other tones than hers, the wall fell, burying the maniac in its ruins. A mist came over the senses of the young knight, strength suddenly fled his arm, he stepped back as to recover himself, but slipped and fell, the violence of the fall dashing his sword many yards in air. "I yield me true prisoner, rescue or no rescue," he said, in a tone so startling in its agony that the rudest heart beside him shrunk within itself appalled, and for a minute Lancaster checked the words upon his lips.

"Nay, nay, yield not in such tone, my gallant foe!" he said, with eager courtesy, and with his own hand aiding him to rise. "Would that I were the majesty of England, I should deem myself debased did I hold such gallantry in durance. Of a truth thou hast robbed me of my conquest, fair sir, for it was no skill of mine which brought thee to the ground. I may thank that shrieking mad woman, perchance, for the preservation of my laurels."

"I give you thanks for your courtesy, my lord," replied Sir Nigel, striving to recover himself; "but I pray you pardon me, if I beseech you let that falling mass be cleared at once, and note if that unhappy woman breathe. Methought," he added, in stronger agitation, "she carried something in her arms."

"She did," answered many voices; "some child or girl, who was struggling, though the head was muffled up as if to prevent all sounds."

"See to it, and bring us news of what you find," said Lancaster, hastily, for the same ghastly expression passed over the countenance of his prisoner as had startled him at first. "Thou art not well, my good lord?" he continued, kindly.

"Nay, I am well, my lord; but I will go with you," replied the young knight, slowly, as if collecting strength ere he could speak. "I am wearied with the turmoil of the last twelve hours' fighting against fire and sword at once; I would fain see the noble Hereford, and with his permission rest me a brief while."

Lancaster made no farther comment, and the two knights, who but a few minutes before had been engaged in deadly strife, now made their way together through the heaps of the dying and the dead, through many a group of rude soldiery, who scowled on Nigel with no friendly eye, for they only recognised him as the destroyer of hundreds of their countrymen, not the chivalric champion who had won the enthusiastic admiration of their leaders, and soon found themselves in the castle-hall, in the presence of the Earl of Hereford, who was surrounded by his noblest officers, Sir Christopher and Lady Seaton, and some few other Scottish prisoners, most of whom were badly wounded. He advanced to meet Sir Nigel, courteously, though gravely.

"It grieves me," he said, "to receive as a prisoner a knight of such high renown and such chivalric bearing as Sir Nigel Bruce; I would he had kept those rare qualities for the sovereign to whom they were naturally due, and who would have known how to have appreciated and honour them, rather than shed such lustre on so weak a cause."

"Does your lordship regard the freedom of an oppressed country so weak a cause?" replied Nigel, the hot blood mounting to his cheek; "the rising in defence of a rightful king, in lieu of slavishly adhering to one, who, though so powerful, all good men, aye, even all good Englishmen, must look on, in his claims to Scotland, as an ambitious usurper. My lord, my lord, the spirit of Hereford spoke not in those words; but I forgive them, for I have much for which to proffer thanks unto the noble Hereford, much, that his knightly soul scorned treachery and gave us a fair field. Durance is but a melancholy prospect, yet an it must be I would not nobler captors."

"Nor would I forfeit the esteem in which you hold me, gallant sir," replied the earl, "and therefore do I pray you, command my services in aught that can pleasure you, and an it interfere not with my duty to my sovereign, I shall be proud to give them. Speak, I pray you."

"Nay, I can ask nought which the Earl of Hereford hath not granted of himself," said Sir Nigel. "I would beseech you to extend protection to all the females of this unhappy castle; to part not my sister from her lord, for, as you see his wounds and weakness call for woman's care; to grant the

leech's aid to those who need it; and if there be some unhappy men of my faithful troop remaining, I would beseech you show mercy unto them, and let them go free, they can work no farther ill to Edward; they can fight no more for Scotland, for she lieth chained; they have no head, and therefore no means of resistance—I beseech you give them freedom unshackled by conditions."

"It shall be, it shall be," replied Hereford, hastily, and evidently moved; "but for thyself, young sir, thyself, can we do nought for thee?"

"Nothing," answered the young man, calmly. "I need little more on earth, for neither my youth, my birth, nor what it pleaseth thee to term my gallantry, will save me from the sweeping axe of Edward. I would beseech thee to let my death atone for all, and redeem my noble friends; but I ask it not, for I know in this thou hast no power; and yet, though I ask nothing now," he added, after a brief pause, and in a lower voice, as to be heard only by Hereford, "ere we march to England I may have a boon to crave—protection, liberty for a beloved one, whose fate as yet I know not." He spoke almost inarticulately, for again it seemed the horrid words and maniac laugh of Jean Roy resounded in his ears. There was that in the look and manner of the English earl inviting confidence; a moment the tortured young man longed to pour all into his ear, to conjure him to find Agnes, and give her to his arms, the next he refrained, for her words, "ask not how I will contrive to abide by thee undiscovered by the foe," suddenly flashed on his memory, with the conviction that if she were indeed still in life, and he acknowledged her his wife, Hereford would feel himself compelled to keep her under restraint, as he did Lady Seaton and the wives of other noble Scotsmen. His lip trembled, but fortunately for the preservation of his composure, Hereford's attention was called from him by the eager entrance of several other officers, who all crowded round him, alike in congratulation and waiting his commands, and preceiving he was agitated, the earl turned from him with a courteous bow. Eagerly he seized that moment to spring to the side of his sister, to whisper the impatient inquiry, "Agnes, where is Agnes?" To feel his heart a moment throb high, and then sink again by her reply, that she had not seen

her since he had placed in the arms of the seer ; that in the fearful confusion which followed, she had looked for her in vain, examined all her accustomed haunts, but discovered no traces of her save the silver tissue veil. There was, however, some hope in that ; Jean Roy, misled by the glittering article, and seeing it perchance in the hands of another, might have been deceived in her prey. Nay, he welcomed the uncertainty of suspense ; there was something so fearful, so horrible in the idea that his own faithful Agnes was among those blackened and mangled bodies, which Lancaster informed him had been discovered beneath the ruins, something so sickening, so revolting, he could not take advantage of the earl's offer to examine them himself, though, Lancaster added, it would not be of much use, for he challenged their dearest friends to recognise them. He could not believe such was her fate. Dermid had not been seen since the fatal conclusion of their marriage ; he knew his fidelity, his interest in both Agnes and himself, and he could not, he would not believe the maniac had decoyed her from his care. But where was she ?—where, in such a moment, could he have conveyed her ?—what would be her final fate ?—how would she rejoin him ? were questions ever thronging on his heart and brain, struggling with doubts, with the horrible suspicion still clinging to that shriek which had sounded as the ruins fell. Darker and more forebodingly oppressive grew these conflicting thoughts, as day after day passed, and still she came not, nor were there any tidings of the seer.

A very brief interval sufficed for the English earls to conclude their arrangements at Kildrummie, and prepare to march southward, Berwick being the frontier town to which the Scottish prisoners were usually conveyed. Their loss had been greater than at any other similar siege ; more than a third of their large army had fallen, several others were wounded, and not much above a third remained who were fitted to continue in arms. It was a fearful proof of the desperate valour of the besieged, but both earls felt it would so exasperate their sovereign against the Scottish commanders, as to remove the slightest hope of mercy. The ruins were with some labour cleared away, the remains of the outer wall levelled with the earth, except the tower communicating with the drawbridge and barbican, which

could be easily repaired. The inner wall Hereford likewise commanded to be restored; the keep he turned into a hospital for the wounded, leaving them with a sufficient garrison to defend the castle, in case of renewed incursions of the Scottish patriots, a case, in the present state of the country, not very probable. True to his promise, those men-at-arms who survived, and whose wounds permitted their removal, Hereford set at liberty, not above ten in number; dispirited, heart-broken, he felt indeed there was no need to impose conditions on them. Those of the traitors who remained, endeavoured, by cringing humility, to gain the favour of the English; but finding themselves shunned and despised, for the commonest English soldier was of a nature too noble to bear with aught of treachery, they dispersed over the country, finding little in its miserable condition to impart enjoyment to the lives they had enacted so base a part to preserve. It may be well to state, ere we entirely leave the subject, that the execution of Evan Roy exciting every evil passion in their already rebellious hearts, had determined them to conspire for a signal revenge, the ravings of Jean Roy and the desperate counsels of her mother-in-law urging them to the catastrophe we have related; the murder of Nigel had been first planned, but dismissed as likely to be discovered and thwarted, and bring vengeance on their own heads instead of his. Before the execution of their comrade and head of the conspiracy, they had only been desirous of shunning the horrors of a prolonged siege; but afterwards, revenge became stronger than mere personal safety, and therefore was it they refused to take advantage of the safe conduct demanded by Nigel, and granted, as we have said.

The Scottish prisoners were removed from the castle a few hours after its capitulation, and placed in honourable restraint, in separate pavilions. Lancaster, whose romantic admiration for his antagonist had not been in the least diminished by Sir Nigel's bearing in captivity and the lofty tone of the young knight's society and conversation, which he frequently courted, absolutely made him shrink from heading the force which was to conduct him a prisoner to England, for he well knew those very qualities, calling forth every spark of chivalry in his own bosom, would be only so many incitements to Edward for his instant execution. He therefore de-

manded that the superintending the works of the garrison and keeping a strict watch upon the movements of the adjoining country should devolve on him, and Hereford, as the older and wiser, should conduct his prisoners to the border, and report the events of the siege to his sovereign. His colleague acceded, and the eighth day from the triumph of the besiegers was fixed on to commence their march.

It was on the evening of the seventh day that the Earl of Hereford, then engaged in earnest council with Lancaster, on subjects relating to their military charge, was informed that an old man and a boy so earnestly entreated speech with him, that they had even moved the iron heart of Hugo de l'Orme, the earl's esquire, who himself craved audience for them.

"They must bear some marvellous charm about them, an they have worked upon thee, De l'Orme," said his master, smiling. "In good sooth, let them enter."

Yet there was nothing very striking in their appearance when they came. The old man indeed was of a tall, almost majestic figure, and it was only the snowy whiteness of his hair and flowing beard that betrayed his age, for his eye was still bright, his form unbent. He was attired as a minstrel, his viol slung across his breast, a garb which obtained for its possessor free entrance alike into camp and castle, hall and bower, to all parties, to all lands, friendly or hostile, as it might be. His companion was a slight boy, seemingly little more than thirteen or fourteen, with small, exquisitely delicate features; his complexion either dark or sunburnt; his eyes were bent down, and their long, very dark lashes rested on his cheek, but when raised, their beautiful blue seemed so little in accordance with the brunette skin, that the sun might be deemed more at fault than Nature; his hair, of the darkest brown, clustered closely round his throat in short thick curls; his garb was that of a page, but more rude than the general habiliments of those usually petted members of noble establishments, and favoured both Hereford and Lancaster's belief that he was either the son or grandson of his companion.

"Ye are welcome, fair sirs," was the elder earl's kindly salutation, when his esquire had retired. "Who and what are ye, and what crave ye with me?"

"We are Scotsmen, an it so please you, noble lords,"

replied the old man ; " followers and retainers of the house of Bruce, more particularly of him so lately fallen into your power."

" Then, by mine honour, my good friends, ye had done wiser to benefit by the liberty I promised and gave to those of his followers who escaped this devastating siege. Wherefore are ye here ? "

" In the name of this poor child, to beseech a boon, my noble lord ; for me, my calling permitteth my going where I list, unquestioned, unrestrained, and if I ask permission to abide with ye, Scotsman and follower of the Bruce as I am, I know ye will not say me nay."

" I would not, an ye besought such boon, old man," answered the earl ; " yet I would advise thee to tempt not thy fate, for even thy minstrel garb, and thou braggest of thy service to the Bruce, I cannot promise to be thy safeguard in Edward's court, whither I give ye notice I wend my way to-morrow's dawn. For this child, what would'st thou—hath he no voice, no power of his own to speak ? "

The aged minstrel looked at his charge, whose eyes were still bent on the floor ; the heaving of his doublet denoted some internal emotion, but ere the old man could answer for him, he had made a few hasty steps forward, and bent his knee before Hereford.

" 'Tis a simple boon I crave, my lord," he said, in a voice so peculiarly sweet, that it seemed to impart new beauty to his features ; " a very simple boon, yet my lips tremble to ask it, for thou mayest deem it more weighty than it seemeth to me, and thou alone canst grant it."

" Speak it, fair child, whate'er it be," replied the earl, reassuringly, and laying his hand caressingly on the boy's head. " Thou art, methinks, over young to crave a boon we may not grant ; too young, although a Scotsman, for Hereford to treat thee aught but kindly. What wouldst thou ? "

" Permission to tend on my young lord, Sir Nigel Bruce," answered the boy, more firmly, and for the first time fixing the full gaze of his beautiful eyes on the earl's face. " Oh, my lord, what is there in that simple boon to bid thee knit thy brow as if it must not be ? " he added, more agitated. " The noble Hereford cannot fear a child ; or, if he doubted me, he cannot doubt the honour of his prisoner, an honour pure, unsullied as his own."

"Thou speakest not as the child thou seemest," replied Hereford, musingly ; "and yet I know not, misery makes sages of us long ere the rose of youth hath faded. For this, thy boon, I know not how it may be granted, it is not usual to permit other than English attendants on our Scottish prisoners. Since Sir Niel Campbell's escape through the agency of his Scottish attendant, it hath been most strictly prohibited."

"Oh, do not, do not say me nay !" entreated the boy ; "I ask but to share his imprisonment, to be with him, serve him, tend him. I ask no more liberty than is granted unto him ; the rudest, coarsest fare, a little straw, or the bare ground beside his couch. I can do nought to give him freedom, and if I could, were there an open path before him—did I beseech him on my knees to fly—if he hath surrendered, as I have heard, to thee, rescue or no rescue, he would scorn my counsel, and abide thy prisoner still. Oh, no, no ! I swear to thee I will do nought that can make thee regret thou hast granted an orphan's prayer."

"And who art thou that pleadeth thus ?" inquired the earl, moved alike by the thrilling sweetness of his voice and the earnestness of his manner. "'Thou must have some wondrous interest in him to prefer imprisonment with him to all the joys which liberty can give."

"And I have interest," answered the boy, fervently ; "the interest, and gratitude, and faithfulness, and love. An orphan, miserably an orphan—alone upon the wide earth—he hath protected, cherished, aye, and honoured me with his confidence and love. He tended me in sorrow, and I would pour back into his noble heart all the love, the devotion he hath excited in mine. Little can I do, alas ! nought but love and serve ; yet, yet, I know he would not reject even this—he would let me love him still !"

"Grant the poor boy his boon," whispered Lancaster, hurriedly ; "of a truth he moveth even me."

"Thine heart is of right true mettle, my child," said his colleague, even tenderly. "Yet bethink thee all thou must endure if I grant thy boon ; not while with me, for there would be a foul blot upon my escutcheon did so noble a knight as Sir Nigel Bruce receive aught save respect and honour at my hands. But in this business I am but a tool, an agent ; when once within the boundaries of Edward's

court, Sir Nigel is no longer my prisoner ; I must resign him to my sovereign ; and then, I dare not give thee hope of gentle treatment either for thyself or him."

"I will brave it," answered the boy, calmly ; "danger, aye, death in his service, were preferable to my personal liberty, with the torture of the thought upon me, that I shrunk from his side when fidelity and love were most needed."

"But that very faithfulness, that very love, my child, will make thy fate the harder ; the scaffold and the axe, if not the cord," he added, in a low, stifled tone, "I fear me, will be his doom, despite his youth, his gallantry—all that would make *me* save him. Thou turnest pale at the bare mention of such things, how couldst thou bear to witness them ?"

"Better than to think of them ; to sit me down in idle safety and feel that he hath gone forth to this horrible doom, and I have done nought to soothe and tend him on his way," replied the boy, firmly, though his very lip blanched at Hereford's words. "But must these things be ? Is Edward so inexorable ?"

"Aye, unto all who thwart him now," said the earl ; "there is no hope for any of the race of Bruce. Be advised, then, gentle boy, retain thy freedom while thou mayest."

"No, no !" he answered, passionately. "Oh, do not seek to fright me from my purpose ; do not think aught of me, save but to grant my boon, and oh, I will bless thee, pray for thee to my dying hour ! thou wilt, I know thou wilt."

"I were no father could I refuse thee, my poor child," he replied, with earnest tenderness. "Alas ! I fear me thou hast asked but increase of misery, yet be it as thou list. And yet," he added, after a brief pause, during which the boy had sprung from his knee, with an articulate cry of joy, and flung himself into the minstrel's arms, "Sir Nigel hath resolutely refused the attendance of any of his former followers, who would willingly have attended him to England. Hast thou so much influence, thinkest thou, to change his purpose in thy favour ?"

"I know not," answered the boy, timidly ; "yet an it please your noble lordship to permit my pleading mine own cause without witness, I may prevail, as I have done before."

"Be it so, then," replied the earl. "And now, ere we part, I would bid thee remember I have trusted thee; I have granted that to thee, without *condition*, with perfect liberty of action, which to others could only have been granted on their surrendering themselves, rescue or no rescue, even as thy master. I have done this, trusting to that noble faithfulness, the candour and honesty of youth, which hath breathed forth in all that thou hast said. Let me not repent it. And now, Hugo de l'Orme," he called aloud, but Lancaster, himself declared his intention of conducting the boy to Sir Nigel's tent, and the esquire was consequently dismissed; but ere they departed, the boy turned once more to the aged minstrel.

"And thou—whither goest thou?" he said, in low yet thrilling tones. "My more than father, thou hast seen thy child's earnest wish fulfilled, that for which thou didst conduct me hither is accomplished; yet ere I say farewell, tell me—oh, tell me, whither goest thou?"

"I know not," answered the old man, struggling with unexpressed emotion; "yet think not of me, my child, I shall be free, be safe, untouched by aught of personal ill, while young and lovely ones, for whom it would be bliss to die, are crushed and bleeding in their spring; the mountains and rocks, and woods, yet unstained with blood, call on me to return, and be at rest within their caves. The love I bear to thee and him thou seekest hath yet a louder voice to bid me follow ye. I know not whither I shall go, yet an my vision telleth that thou needst my aid, I shall not be far from thee. Farewell, my child; and ye, true-hearted lords, the blessing of an aged man repay ye for the kindly deed this day that ye have done." He pressed the boy in his arms, reverentially saluted the earls, and passed from the tent as he spoke.

A few words passed between the warriors, and then Lancaster desired the page to follow him. In silence they proceeded through the camp, avoiding the more bustling parts, where the soldiery were evidently busied in preparing for the morrow's march, and inclining towards the wooded bank of the river. The eye of the Earl of Lancaster had scarcely moved from the page during his interview with Hereford, though the boy, engrossed in his own feelings, had failed to remark it. He now glanced rapidly and searchingly round

him, and perceiving the ground perfectly clear, not a soldier visible, he suddenly paused in his hasty stride, and laying his hand heavily on the boy's shoulder, said, in a deep, impressive voice, "I know not who or what thou art, but I love thy master, and know that he is ill at ease, not from captivity, but from uncertainty as to the fate of one beloved. If it be, as I suspect, in thy power entirely to remove this uneasiness, be cautioned, and whoever thou mayest be, let not one in this camp, from the noble Earl of Hereford himself to the lowest soldier, suspect thou art other than thou seemest—a faithful page. The rage of Edward is deadly, and all who bear the name of Bruce, be it male or female, will suffer from that wrath. Tell this to thy lord. I ask not his confidence nor thine, nay, I would refuse it were it offered—I would know no more than my own thoughts, but I honour him, aye, and from my very heart I honour thee! Hush! not a word in answer; my speech is rude, but my heart is true; and now a few steps more and we are there," and without waiting for reply he turned suddenly, and the page found himself in the very centre of the camp, near the entrance of a small pavilion, before which two sentinels were stationed, fully armed, and pacing up and down their stated posts; the pennon of Hereford floated from the centre staff, above the drapery, marking the tent and all its appurtenances peculiarly the earl's. The watchword was exchanged, and the sentinels lowered their arms on recognising one of their leaders.

"Let this boy have egress and ingress from and to this tent, unquestioned and unmolested," he said; "he has the Earl of Hereford's permission, nay, commands, to wait on Sir Nigel Bruce. His business lieth principally with him; but if he hath need to quit his side, he is to pass free. Report this to your comrades." The soldiers bowed in respectful acquiescence. "For thee, young man, this toy will give thee free passage where thou listeth, none shall molest thee; and now, farewell—God speed thee." He unclasped a ruby brooch, curiously set in antique gold, from his collar, and placed it in the boy's hand.

"Dost thou not enter?" asked the page, in a voice that quivered, and the light of the torches falling full on his face disclosed to Lancaster a look of such voiceless gratitude, it haunted him for many a long day.

"No," he said, half smiling, and in a lower voice; "hast thou forgotten thy cause was to be pleaded without witness? I have not, if thou hast. I will see thy noble master ere he depart, not now; thou wilt, I trust me, take him better comfort than I could."

He lifted the hangings as he spoke, and the boy passed in, his heart beating well-nigh to suffocation as he did so. It was in a small compartment leading to the principal chamber of the tent he found himself at first, and Sir Nigel was not there. With a fleet yet noiseless movement he drew aside the massive curtain, let it fall again behind him, and stood unperceived in the presence of him he sought.

The brow of Sir Nigel rested on his hand, his attitude was as one bowed and drooping 'neath despondency; the light of the taper fell full upon his head, bringing it out in beautiful profile. It was not his capture alone which had made him thus, the boy felt and knew; the complicated evils which attended his king and country in his imprisonment were yet not sufficient to crush that spirit to the earth. It was some other anxiety, some yet nearer woe; there had been many strange rumours afloat, both of Sir Nigel's bridal and the supposed fate of that bride, and the boy, though he knew them false, aye, and that the victim of Jean Roy was a young attendant of Agnes, who had been collecting together the trinkets of her mistress, to save them from the pillage which would attend the conquest of the English, and had been thus mistaken by the maniac—the boy, we say, though he knew this, had, instead of denying it, encouraged the report, and therefore was at no loss to discover his master's woe. He advanced, knelt down, and in a trembling, husky voice, addressed him. "My lord—Sir Nigel."

The young knight started, and looked at the intruder, evidently without recognising him. "What wouldst thou?" he said, in a tone somewhat stern. "Who art thou, thus boldly intruding on my privacy? Begone, I need thee not."

"The Earl of Hereford hath permitted me to tend thee, follow thee," answered the page, in the same subdued voice. "My gracious lord, do not thou refuse me."

"Tend me—follow me! whither—to the scaffold? Seek some other master, my good boy. I know thee not, and can serve thee little, and need no earthly aid. An thou

seekest noble service, go follow Hereford ; he is a generous and knightly lord."

"But I am Scotch, my lord, and would rather follow thee to death than Hereford to victory."

"Poor child, poor child !" repeated Nigel, sadly. "I should know thee, methinks, an thou wouldst follow me so faithfully, and yet I do not. What claim have I upon thy love ?"

"Dost thou not know me, Nigel ?" The boy spoke in his own peculiarly sweet and most thrilling voice, and raising his head, fixed his full glance upon the knight.

A wild cry burst from Nigel's lips, he sprang up, gazed once again, and in another moment the page and knight had sprung into each other's arms ; the arms of the former were twined round the warrior's neck, and Sir Nigel had bent down his lordly head ; burning tears and impassioned kisses were mingled on the soft cheek that leaned against his breast.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE ancient town of Berwick-upon-Tweed, associated as it is with Scottish and English history from the time these two kingdoms had a name, presented a somewhat different aspect in the year 1307 to that of the present day. The key to both countries, it was ever a scene of struggle, unless the sister kingdoms chanced to be at peace, an event in the middle ages of rare occurrence, and whoever was its fortunate possessor was undeniably considered as the greater power. Since the death of Alexander it had been captured no less than three times, by Edward, in 1296, by Wallace, the succeeding year, and recaptured by the English the following spring. To Edward, consequently, it now belonged, and many and fearful had been the sanguinary executions its walls had beheld. Its streets had been deluged with noble Scottish blood ; its prisons filled with the nobles of Scotland ; even high-minded women, who by their countenance and faithfulness had given a yet higher tone to patriotism and valour, were said to be there immured. It might have been termed not alone the key but the dungeon

and grave of Scotland, and many a noble spirit which had never quailed in the battle's front, shrunk back appalled as it neared those dismal walls.

In the time of Edward, the fortifications, though merely consisting of a deep moat and wooden palisades, instead of the stone wall still remaining, enclosed a much larger space than the modern town. A magnificent castle, with its "mounts, rampiers and flankers," its towers, walls, and courts, crowned an easy ascent overhanging the Tweed, and was at this period peopled by a powerful garrison, filled with immense stores, both of arms, artillery, and provisions, and many unhappy prisoners, who from their lonely turrets could look beyond the silver Tweed on their own beautiful land, their hearts burning with the vain desire to free her from her chains. Both square and round towers guarded the palisades and moat surrounding the town, which presented a goodly collection of churches, hospitals, dwelling-houses, stores, and monastic buildings; from all of which crowds were continually passing and repassing on their several ways, and forming altogether a motley assemblage of knights, nobles, men-at-arms, archers, the various orders of monks, the busy leech from the hospital, the peaceful burgher, the bustling storekeeper, and artisan, noble dames and pretty maidens—all in the picturesque costumes of the day, jostling one another, unconscious of the curious effect they each assisted to produce, and ever and anon came the trampling of fiery steeds. It was a rich, thriving, bustling town, always presenting curious scenes of activity, at present apparently under some excitement, which the gay knights and their followers tended not a little to increase.

The popular excitement had, strange to say, been confined for an unusually long time to one subject. Orders had been received from King Edward for the erection of an extraordinary cage or tower, curiously worked in stone and iron, on the very highest turret of the castle, visible to every eye, of a circular form, with pyramidal points, supporting gilded balls, giving it the appearance when completed of a huge coronet or crown. It was barred and cross-barred with iron on all sides, effectually preventing egress from within, but exposing its inmate, whoever that might be, to every passer-by. The impatient king had

commanded several of the artisans employed in its erection to be thrown into prison, because it was not completed fast enough to please him ; but, despite his wrath and impatience, the work of fashioning the iron, wood, and stone as he required occasioned them to proceed but slowly, and it was now, three months after the royal order had been given, only just completed, and firmly fixed on the principal turret of the castle. Day after day the people flocked to gaze and marvel for whom it could be intended, and when it would be occupied, their thoughts only turned from it by the intelligence that the Earl of Hereford, with some Scottish prisoners of high rank, was within four-and-twenty hours' march of the town, and was there to deliver up his captives to the seneschal of the castle, the Earl of Berwick. At the same time rumours were afloat, that the prisoner for whom that cage had been erected was, under a strong guard, advancing from Carlisle, and likely to encounter Hereford at the castle gates.

The popular excitement increased threefold ; the whole town seemed under the influence of a restless fever, utterly preventing the continuance of their usual avocations, or permitting them to rest quiet in their houses. Crowds filled the streets, and pressed and fumed to obtain places by the great gates and open squares of the castle, through which both parties must pass. That wind, rain, and sunshine alternately ruled the day was a matter of small importance ; nor did it signify that English soldiers were returning victorious, with Scottish prisoners, being a thing now of most common occurrence. Before the day was over, however, they found anticipation for once had been less marvellous than reality, and stranger things were seen and heard than they had dreamed of.

From sunrise till noon they waited and watched, and waxed impatient in vain. About that time trumpets and drums were heard from the south, and there was a general rush towards the bridge, and hearts beat high in expectancy of they knew not what, as a gallant band of English archers and men-at-arms, headed by some few knights, were discovered slowly and solemnly advancing from the Carlisle road. Where and who was the prisoner ? A person of some consequence, of dangerous influence it must be, else why had the king made such extraordinary provision for

confinement? There were not wanting suggestions and guesses, and wondrous fancies; for as yet there was such a close guard in the centre of the cavalcade, that the very person of the prisoner could not be distinguished. Nay, there were some who ventured to hint and believe it might be the excommunicated Earl of Carrick himself. It was most likely, for whom else could the cage, so exactly like a crown, be intended, and there were many who vaunted the wise policy of Edward, at having hit on such an expedient for lowering his rival's pride. Others indeed declared the idea was all nonsense; it was not likely he would incur such expense, king as he was, merely to mortify a traitor he had sworn to put to death. The argument waxed loud and warm. Meanwhile the cavalcade had crossed the bridge, been received through the south gate, and in the same slow and solemn pomp proceeded through the town.

"By all the saints, it is only a woman!" was the information shouted by an eager spectator, who had clambered above the heads of his fellows to obtain the first and most coveted view. His words were echoed in blank amazement.

"Aye, clothed in white like a penitent, with her black hair streaming all over her shoulders, without any covering on her head at all, and nothing but a thin, torn sandal on her bare feet; and the knights look black as thunder, as if they like not the business they are engaged in."

It was even so. There was an expression on the face of the officers impossible to be misunderstood; frowningly, darkly, they obeyed their sovereign's mandate, simply because they dared not disobey; but there was not one among them who would not rather have sought the most deadly front of battle than thus conduct a woman, aye, and a most noble one, unto her prison. The very men, rude, stern as they mostly were, shared this feeling; they guarded her with lowered heads and knitted brows; and if either officer or men-at-arms had to address her, it was with an involuntary yet genuine movement and manner of respect that little accorded with their present relative position. The crowds looked first at the cavalcade and marvelled, then at the prisoner, and they did not marvel more.

Clad as she was, in white, flowing garments, very similar to those worn by penitents, her head wholly undefended

from cold or rain even by a veil, her long, luxuriant, jet-black hair, in which as yet, despite of care and woe, no silver thread had mingled, falling round her from her noble brow, which shone forth from its shade white as snow, and displaying that most perfect face, which anguish had only chiselled into paler, purer marble; it could not rob it of its beauty, that beauty which is the holy emanation of the soul, *that* lingered still with power to awe the rudest heart, to bow the proudest in voluntary respect.

The sovereign of England had commanded this solemn procession and its degrading accompaniments to humble, to crush to dust the woman who had dared defy his power, but it was himself alone he humbled. As she walked there, surrounded by guards, by gazing hundreds, on foot, and but protected from the flinty ground by a thin sandal, her step was as firm and unfaltering, her attitude, her bearing as dignified, as calmly, imposingly majestic as when, in the midst of Scotland's patriots, she had placed the crown on the Bruce's head. Edward sought to debase her, but she was not debased; to compel her to regret the part that she had acted, but she gloried in it still; to acknowledge his power—but in all he failed.

Calmly and majestically the Countess of Buchan proceeded on her way, neither looking to the right or left, nor evincing by the slightest variation of countenance her consciousness of the many hundreds gazing on, or that they annoyed or disturbed her; her spirit was wrapt in itself. We should assert falsehood did we say she did not suffer; she did, but it was a mother's agony heightened by a patriot's grief. She believed her son, who had been in truth the idol of her mourning heart, had indeed fallen. Her Agnes was not amongst the queen's train, of whose captivity she had been made aware, though not allowed speech with them. Where was *she*—what would be her fate? She only knew her as a lovely, fragile flower, liable to be crushed under the first storm; and pictured her, rudely severed from Nigel, perchance in the hands of some lawless spoiler, and heartbroken, dying. Shuddering with anguish, she thought not of her own fate—she thought but of her children, of her country; and if King Robert did enter these visions, it was simply as her sovereign, as one whose pa-

triotism would yet achieve the liberty of Scotland ; but there was a dimness even o'er that dream, for the figure of her noble boy was gone, nought but a blank—dull, shapeless—occupied that spot in the vision of the future, which once his light had filled.

The castle-yard was at length gained, and a halt and some change in the line of march ensued ; the officers and men formed in a compact crescent, leaving the countess, a herald, trumpeters, and some of the highest knights in front. So intense was the interest of the crowd at this moment, that they did not heed the rapid advance of a gallant body of horse and foot from the north, except to rail at the pressure they occasioned in forcing their way through. They gained the castle-yard at length and there halted, and fell back in utter astonishment at the scene they witnessed.

The herald had drawn a parchment from his belt and made a step forward as if to speak. The knights, in sullen silence, leant upon their sheathed swords, without even glancing at their prisoner, who appeared far the most composed and dignified of all present, and, after a brief pause, words to this effect were distinguished by the crowd.

“ To our loyal and loving subjects of both North and South Britain, Edward, by the grace of God, King of England, Wales, France, and Scotland, greeting. Whereas Isabella, born of Fife, and late of Buchan, which latter she hath, by foul dishonour and utter disregard of marriage vows, now forfeited, hath done traitorously and disloyalty alike to her sovereign lord the king and to her gracious lord and husband, John, Earl of Buchan, whom, for his fidelity, we hold in good favour. As she had not struck by the sword, so she shall not perish by the sword ; but for her lawless conspiracy she shall be shut up in a stone and iron chamber, circular as the crown she gave, in this proclaiming to both countries her everlasting infamy. And this we do in mercy, for whereas she deserveth death ; we do remit the same, and give her time to repent her of her heinous crime.

“ Given at our palace of Carlisle, this twenty-third day of February, in the year of our Lord and Saviour, one thousand three hundred and seven. God save the King !”

But the loyal ejaculation was not echoed, nay, the herald himself had read the proclamation as if every word had been

forced from him, and the eyes of every knight and soldier had been fixed upon the ground, as if shame rested on them rather than on their prisoner. A dead silence for a few minutes followed, broken only by some faint cries of "God save King Edward, and down with all traitors!" which seemed raised more to drown the groans which involuntarily burst forth, than as the echo of the heart. They dared not evince the faintest sign of disapproval, for they stood on precarious ground; a groan even might be punished by their irritable king as treachery; but there was one present who cared little for this charge. Scarcely had the words passed the herald's lips, before a young man, whose bare head and lack of all weapons would have proclaimed him one of the Earl of Hereford's prisoners, had not the attention of all been turned from him by the one engrossing object, now snatching a sword from a soldier near him, sprung from his horse and violently attacking the herald, exclaimed, in a voice of thunder—

"Liar and slave! thinkest thou there is none near to give the lie to thy foul slanders—none to defend the fair fame, the stainless honour of this much-abused lady? Dastard and coward, fit mouthpiece of a dishonoured and blasphemous tyrant! go tell him, his prisoner—aye, Nigel Bruce—thrusts back his foul lies into his very teeth. Ha! coward and slave, wouldst thou shun me?"

A scene of indescribable confusion now ensued. The herald, a man not much in love with war, stood cowering and trembling before his adversary, seeking to cover himself with his weapon, but, from his trembling hold, ineffectually. The stature of the youthful Scotsman appeared towering, as he stood over him with his uplifted sword, refusing to strike a defenceless man, but holding him with a gripe of iron; his cheek flushed crimson, his nostrils distended, for his soul was moved with a mightier, darker passion than had ever stirred its depths before. The soldiers of both parties, joined too by some from the castle—for a party headed by the Earl of Berwick himself had attended to give countenance to the proclamation—rushed forward, but involuntarily fell back, awed for the moment by the mighty spirit of one man; the knights, roused from their sullen posture, looked much as if they would, if they dared, have left the herald to his fate. Hereford and Berwick at

the same instant spurred forward their steeds, the one exclaiming, "Madman, let go your hold—you are tempting your own fate! Nigel, for the love of heaven! for the sake of those that love you, be not so rash!" the other thundering forth, "Cut down the traitor, an he will not lose his hold. Forward, cowardly knaves! will ye hear your king insulted and not revenge it?—forward, I say! fear ye a single man?"

And numbers, spurred on by his words, dashed forward to obey him, but fearlessly Sir Nigel Bruce retained his hold with his left hand, and with his right grasped tighter his sword, and stood, with the fierce undaunted port of a lion lashed into fury, gazing on his foes; but ere he had crossed with the foremost weapons, a slight lad burst through the gathering crowd, and with a piercing shriek threw himself at his master's feet, and grasping his knees, seemed by his pleading looks, for his words were inaudible, imploring him to desist from his rashness. At the same moment another form pressed through the soldiers, her look, her mien compelling them involuntarily to open their ranks and give her passage. The sword of Nigel was in the act of falling on a second foe, the first lay at his feet, when his arm was caught in its descent, and Isabella of Buchan stood at his side.

"Forbear!" she said, in those rich impressive tones that ever forced obedience. "Nigel Bruce, brother of my sovereign, friend of my son, forbear! strike not one blow for me. Mine honour needs no defence by those that love me; my country will acquit me; the words of England's monarch, angered at a woman's defiance of his power, affect me not! Noble Nigel, excite not further wrath against thyself by this vain struggle for my sake; put up thy sword, ere it is forced from thee. Let go thy hold; this man is but an instrument, why wreak thy wrath on him? Must I speak, implore in vain? Nay, then, I do command thee!"

And those who gazed on her, as she drew that stately form to its full height, as they heard those accents of imperative command, scarce marvelled that Edward should dread her influence, woman as she was. Despite the increasing wrath on the Earl of Berwick's brow, the men waited to see the effect of these words. There was still an

expression of ill-controlled passion on Nigel's features. He waited one moment when she ceased to speak, then slowly and deliberately shook the herald by the collar, and hurled him from his hold ; snapped his sword in twain, and flinging it from him, folded his arms on his breast, and calmly uttering, "Pardon me, noble lady, mine honour were impugned had I suffered that dastardly villain to pass hence unpunished. Let Edward act as he lists, it matters little now," waited with impenetrable resolve the rage he had provoked.

"Nigel, Nigel, rash, impetuous boy, what hast thou done?" exclaimed the countess, losing all mien and accent of command in the terror with which she clung round him, as if to protect him from all ill, in the tone and look of maternal tenderness with which she addressed him. "Why, why, must it be my ill fate to hurl down increase of misery and danger on whom I love?"

"Speak not so, noble lady, in mercy do not!" he whispered in reply ; "keep that undaunted spirit shown but now, I can better bear it than this voice of anguish. And thou," he added, laying his hand on the shoulder of the boy, who still clung to his knees, as if fascinated there by speechless terror, and gazed alternately on him and the countess with eyes glazed almost in madness, "up, up ; this is no place for thee. What can they do with me but slay—let them come on—better, far better than a scaffold!" but the boy moved not, Nigel spoke in vain.

The fate he dared seemed indeed threatening. Wrought well-nigh to frenzy at this daring insult to his sovereign, in whose acts of cruelty and oppression he could far better sympathise than in his more knightly qualities, the Earl of Berwick loudly and fiercely called on his soldiers to advance and cut down the traitor, to bring the heaviest fetters and bear him to the lowest dungeon. The men roused from their stupor of amaze, rushed on impetuously to obey him ; their naked swords already gleamed round Nigel ; the Countess of Buchan was torn from his side, her own especial guards closing darkly around her ; but vainly did they seek to unclasp the convulsive grasp of the boy from Nigel, he neither shrieked nor spake, but he remained in that one posture rigid as stone.

"Fiends ; monsters ! would ye, dare ye touch a boy, a

child as this?" shouted Nigel, struggling with herculean strength to free himself from the rude grasp of the soldiers, as he beheld the sharp steel pointed at the breast of the boy, to compel him to unloose his hold. "Villains, cowards! bear back and let me speak with him," and nerved to madness by the violence of his emotions, he suddenly wrenched himself away, the rapidity of the movement throwing one of the men to the earth, and bent over the boy; again they rushed forward, they closed upon him, they tore away the lad by force of numbers, and flung him senseless on the earth; they sought to bear away their prisoner, but at that moment, Hereford, who had been parleying loudly and wrathfully with Berwick, spurred his charger in the very midst of them, and compelled them to bear back.

"Back, back!" he exclaimed, making a path for himself with his drawn sword; "how dare ye thrust yourselves betwixt me and my lawful prisoner, captive of my sword and power? what right have ye to dare detain him? Let go your hold, none but the men whose prowess gained this gallant prize shall guard him till my sovereign's will be known. Back, back, I say!"

"Traitor!" retorted Berwick, "he is no longer your prisoner. An insult offered to King Edward, in the royal citadel of Berwick, in my very presence, his representative as I stand, shall meet with fit retribution. He hath insulted his sovereign by act and word, and I attach him of high treason and will enforce my charge. Forward, I say!"

"And I say back!" shouted the Earl of Hereford; "I tell thee, proud earl, he is my prisoner, and mine alone. Thou mayest vaunt thy loyalty, thy representation of majesty, as thou listeth, mine hath been proved at the good sword's point, and Edward will deem me no traitor because I protect a captive, who hath surrendered himself a knight to a knight, rescue or no rescue, from this unseemly violence. I bandy no more words with such as thee; back! the first man that dares lay hold on him I chastise with my sword."

"Thou shalt repent this!" muttered Berwick, with a suppressed yet terrible oath, but he dared proceed no farther.

A signal from their leader brought up all Hereford's men, who, in compact order and perfect silence, surrounded the prisoner. Sternly the Earl called for a pair of

handcuffs, and with his own hands fastened them on his captive. "It grieves me," he said, "to see a brave man thus manacled, but thine own mad act hath brought it on thyself. And now, my Lord of Berwick, an it please thee to proceed, we demand admission to thy citadel in King Edward's name. Bring up the other prisoners."

Concealing his wrath with difficulty, the Earl of Berwick and his attendants dashed forward over the drawbridge into the castle at full speed, closing the gates and lowering the portcullis after them. After a brief space, the portcullis was again raised, the gates flung wide apart, and the men-at-arms were discerned lining either side, in all due form and homage to the officers of their sovereign. During the wrathful words passing between the two earls, the attention of the crowd had been given alternately to them and to the Countess of Buchan, who had utterly forgotten her own precarious situation in anxiety for Nigel, and in pity for the unfortunate child, who had been hurled by the soldiers close to the spot where she stood.

"Do not leave him there, he will be trampled on," she said, imploringly, to the officers beside her. "He can do no harm, poor child, Scotch though he be. A little water, only bring me a little water, and he will speedily recover."

All she desired was done, the boy was tenderly raised and brought within the circle of her guards, and laid on the ground at her feet. She knelt down beside him, chafed his cold hands within her own, and moistened his lips and brow with water. After a while his scattered senses returned, he started up in a sitting posture, and gazed in wild inquiry around him, uttering a few inarticulate words, and then saying aloud, "Sir Nigel, my lord, my—my—master, where is he? oh! let me go to him; why am I here?"

"Thou shalt go to him, poor boy, as soon as thy strength returns; an they have let thee follow him from Scotland, surely they will not part ye now," said the countess, soothingly, and her voice seemed to rouse the lad into more consciousness. He gazed long in her face, with an expression which at the time she could not define, but which startled and affected her, and she put her arm round him and kissed his brow. A convulsive almost agonized sob broke from *the boy's* breast, and caused his slight frame to shake as

with an ague, then suddenly he knelt before her, and in accents barely articulate, murmured—

“Bless me, oh, bless me!” while another word seemed struggling for utterance, but checked with an effort which caused it to die on his lips in indistinct murmurs.

“Bless thee, poor child! from my very heart I do, if the blessing of one sorrowing and afflicted as myself can in aught avail thee. For thy faithfulness to thy master, I bless thee, for it speaketh well for thee, and that face would bid me love and bless thee for thyself, I know not wherefore. Good angels keep and bless thee, gentle boy! thou hast Isabella’s prayers, and may they give thee peace.”

“Pray for me, aye, pray for me,” repeated the boy, in the same murmured tones. He clasped her hands in both his, he pressed them again and again to his lips, repeated sobs burst from his labouring breast, and then he sprung up, darted away and stood at Sir Nigel’s side, just as the Earl of Hereford had commanded his men to wheel a little to the right, to permit the Countess of Buchan, her guards and officers, free passage over the drawbridge, and first entrance within the fortress.

The brow of this noble son of chivalry darkened as, sitting motionless on his tall steed, his gaze rested on the noble woman whom it had originally been his painful charge to deliver over to his sovereign. He had not dreamed of a vengeance such as this. He could not have believed a change so dark as this had fallen on the character of a sovereign whom he still loved, still sought to admire and revere, and his spirit sunk ’neath the sorrow this conviction caused. Almost involuntarily, as the procession slowly proceeded, and the countess passed within three paces of his horse’s head, he bent his lordly brow in silent homage; she saw it and returned it, more affected by the unfeigned commiseration on that warrior’s face, than at aught which had occurred to shame and humble her that morning.

A brief pause took place in the movements of the officers and their prisoners, when they reached the great hall of the castle. For a brief minute Lady Seaton and the Countess of Buchan had met, had clasped hands, in sad yet eager greeting. “My child, mine Agnes?” had been by the latter hurriedly whispered, and the answer, “Safe, I trust

safe," just permitted to reach her ear, when roughly and fiercely the Earl of Berwick summoned the Lady of Buchan to proceed to the chamber appointed for her use. Those simple words had, however, removed a load of anxiety from her mind, for they appeared to confirm what she had sometimes permitted herself to hope, that Agnes had shared King Robert's exile, under the care of Lady Campbell; prevailed on to do so, perchance, by the entreaties of Nigel, who in all probability had deemed that course, though one of hardship, less perilous than remaining with him. She hoped indeed against her better judgment, for though she knew not the depth, the might of her daughter's feelings, she knew it must have been a terrible trial so to part, and she absolutely shuddered when she thought of the whelming blow it would be to the young heart when the fate of her betrothed was ascertained.

Lady Seaton had spoken as she believed. No communication had been permitted between the prisoners on their way to England; indeed, from Sir Christopher's wounded and exhausted state, he had travelled more leisurely in a litter. Always in the rear of the earl's detachment, occupied by her close attendance upon him, his wife had scarcely been aware of the young page ever in attendance on her brother, or deemed him, if she did observe him, a retainer of Hereford's own. There was so much of fearful peril and misery hovering over her in her husband's fate, that it was not much wonder her thoughts lingered there more than on Agnes, and that she was contented to believe as she had spoken, that she at least was safe.

Night fell on the town of Berwick. Silence and darkness had come on her brooding wings: the varied excitement of the day was now but a matter of wondering commune round the many blazing hearths, where the busy crowds of the morning had now gathered. Night came, with her closing pall, her softened memories, her sleeping visions and sad waking dreams. She had come, alike to the mourned and mourner, the conqueror and his captive, the happy and the wretched. She had found the Earl of Berwick pacing up and down his stately chamber, his curtained couch unsought, devising schemes to lower the haughty pride of the gallant warrior whom he yet feared. She had looked softly within the room where that warrior lay, and found him,

too, sleepless, but not from the same dark dreams. He grieved for his sovereign, for the fate of one noble spirit shrined in a woman's form, and restless and fevered, turned again and again within his mind how he might save from a yet darker doom the gallant youth his arms had conquered. And not alone on them did night look down. She sent her sweet, reviving influence, on the rays of a bright, liquid star, through the narrow casement which gave light to the rude unfurnished chamber where Sir Nigel Bruce and his attendant lay. They had not torn that poor faithful child from his side. Hereford's last commands had been that they should not part them, and there they now lay; and sleep, balmy sleep, had for them descended on the wings of night, hovering over that humble pallet of straw, when from the curtained couch of power, the downy bed of luxury she fled. There they lay; but it was the boy who laid on the pallet of straw, his head pillowed by the arm of the knight, who sat on a wooden settle at his side. He had watched for a brief space those troubled slumbers, but as they grew calmer and calmer, he had pressed one light kiss on the soft yielding cheek, and then leant his head on his breast, and he too, slept—even in sleep tending one beloved.

And in the dark, close sleeping chamber within the prison cage of the noble Countess of Buchan, night too looked pityingly. Sleep indeed was not there; it had come and gone, for in a troubled slumber a dream had come of Agnes, and she had woke to think upon her child and pray for her, and as she prayed she thought of her promise to the poor boy who had so strangely moved her. She could not trace how one thought had sprung from the other, nor why in the darkness his features so suddenly flashed before her, but so it was; his face seemed to gleam upon her with the same strange, indefinable expression which even at the time had startled her, and then a sudden flash appeared to illumine that darkness of bewilderment. She started up from her reclining posture; she pressed both hands on her throbbing eyeballs; a wild, sickening yearning took possession of her whole soul, and then she felt, in its full bitterness, she was a chained and guarded prisoner, and the deep anguish of her spirit found vent in the convulsive cry—

“Fool, fool that I was—my child! my child!”

CHAPTER XXII.

LEAVING the goodly town of Berwick and its busy citizens, its castle and its prisoners for a brief space, we must now transport our readers to a pleasant chamber overlooking the Eden, in the castle of Carlisle, now a royal residence, a fact which, from its numerous noble inmates, its concourse of pages, esquires, guards, and various other retainers of a royal establishment, the constant ingress and egress of richly-attired courtiers, the somewhat bustling yet deferential aspect of the scene, a very cursory glance would have been all-sufficient to prove.

It had been with a full determination to set all obstacles, even disease itself, at defiance, King Edward, some months before, had quitted Winchester, and directed his march towards the North, vowing vengeance against the rebellious and disaffected Scots, and swearing death alone should prevent the complete and terrible extermination of the traitors. He had proceeded in this spirit to Carlisle, disregarding the threatening violence of disease, so sustained by the spirit of disappointed ambition within as scarcely to be conscious of an almost prostrating increase of weakness and exhaustion. He had determined to make a halt of some weeks at Carlisle, to wait the effect of the large armies he had sent forward to overrun Scotland, and to receive intelligence of the measures they had already taken. Here, then, disease, as if enraged that he should have borne up so long, that his spirit had mastered even her, convened the whole powers of suffering, and compelled him not alone to acknowledge but to writhe beneath her sway. His whole frame was shaken: intolerable pains took possession of him, and though the virulence of the complaint was at length so far abated as to permit him a short continuance of life, he could never sit his horse again, or even hope to carry on in his own person his plans for the total reduction of Scotland. But as his frame weakened, as he became the victim of almost continual pain, all the darker and fiercer passions of his nature gained yet more fearful ascendancy. The change had been some time gathering, but within the last *twelve months* its effects were such, that his noblest, most

devoted knights, blind as their affection for his person rendered them, could scarce recognise in the blood-thirsty, ambitious tyrant they now beheld, their gallant, generous, humane, and most chivalric sovereign, who had won golden opinions from all sorts and conditions of men; who had performed the duties of son and husband so as to fix the eyes of all Europe on him with admiration; who had swayed the sceptre of his mighty kingdom, with such a powerful and fearless hand, it had been long since England had acquired such weight in the scale of kingdoms. Wise, moderate, merciful even in strict justice as he had been, could it be that ambition had wrought such a change; that disease had vanished every feeling from his breast, save this one dark, fiend-like passion, for the furtherance of which, or in revenge of its disappointment, noble blood flowed like water—the brave, the good, the young, the old, the noble and his follower, alike fell before the axe or the cord of the executioner? Could it be indeed that Edward, once such a perfect, glorious scion of chivalry, had now shut up his heart against its every whisper, lest it should interfere with his brooding visions of revenge; forgot each feeling, lest he should involuntarily sympathise with the noble and knightly spirit of the patriots of Scotland, whom he had sworn to crush? Alas! it was even so; ruthless and tyrannical, the nobles he had once favoured, once loved, now became odious to him, for their presence made him painfully conscious of the change within himself; and he now associated but with spirits dark, fierce, cruel as his own—men he would once have shunned, have banished from his court, as utterly unworthy of his favour.

It was, then, in a royally-furnished chamber, pleasantly overlooking the river Eden and the adjoining country, that about a week after the events narrated in the preceding chapter, King Edward reclined. His couch was softly and luxuriously cushioned, and not a little art had been expended in the endeavour to lighten his sufferings, and enable him to rest at ease. The repeated contraction of his countenance, however, betrayed how impotent was even luxury when brought in contact with disease. The richly-furred and wadded crimson velvet robe could not conceal the attenuation of his once peculiarly fine and noble form; his great length of limb, which had gained him, and handed down to

posteriority, the inelegant surname of Longshanks, rendered his appearance yet more gaunt and meagre; while his features which once, from the benignity and nobleness of his character, had been eminently handsome, now pale, thin, and pointed, seemed to express but the one passion of his soul—its gratification of revenge. His expansive brow was now contracted and stern, rendered more so perhaps by the lack of hair about the temples; he wore a black velvet cap, circled coronet-wise with large diamonds, from which a white feather drooped to his shoulder. There was a slight, scarcely visible, sneer resting on his features that morning, called forth perhaps by his internal scorn of the noble with whom he had deigned a secret conference; but the Earl of Buchan had done him good service, had ably forwarded his revenge, and he would not therefore listen to that still voice of scorn.

"Soh! she is secure, and your desire on that head accomplished, sir earl," he said, in continuance of some subject they had been discussing. "Thou hast done us good service, and by mine honour, it would seem we had done your lordship the same."

"Aye," muttered the earl, whose dark features had not grown a whit more amiable since we last beheld him; "aye, we are both avenged."

"How, sir! darest thou place thyself on a par with me?" angrily retorted Edward; "thinkest thou the sovereign of England can have aught in common with such as thee? Isabella of Buchan, or of Fife, as thou likest that better, is debased, imprisoned, because she hath dared insult our person, defy our authority, to act treasonably and mischievously, and sow dissension and rebellion amid our Scottish subjects—for this she is chastised; an it gratify your matrimonial revenge, I am glad on't; but Edward of England brooks no equality with Comyn of Buchan, though it be but equality in revenge."

Buchan bent his knee, and humbly apologised.

"Well, well, let it be; thou hast served us too faithfully to be quarrelled with, for perchance unintentional irreverence. The imposition of her child's murder, when he lives and is well, is the coinage of thine own brain, sir earl, and thou must reconcile it to thine own conscience. We hold ourselves exempt from all such peculiar mercy, for we

scarce see its wisdom." There was a slight bitterness in Edward's tone.

"Wisdom, my sovereign liege, deemest thou there is no wisdom in revenge?" and the brow of the earl grew dark with passion, as he spoke. "Have I nought to punish, nought to avenge in this foul traitress—nought, that her black treachery has extended to my son, my heir, even to his tender years? I would not have her death; no, let her live and feed on the belief that her example, her counsels have killed her own child; that had it not been for her, he might have lived, been prosperous, aye, and happy now. Is there no wisdom in such revenge? and if there be none, save that which my own heart feels, I could give your grace another and a better reason for this proceeding."

"Speak it, in St. George's name," replied the king; "of a truth thou art of most clear conception in all schemes of vengeance. I might have thought long enough, ere I could have lighted on such as this. What more?"

"Simply, your grace, that by encouraging a little while the report of his death, his friends in Scotland will forget that he ever existed, and make no effort for his rescue; which belief, wild and unfounded as it is, I imagine supports him in his strenuous determination to live and die a traitor to your highness. I have no hatred to the boy; nay, an he would let me, could love and be proud of him, now his mother cannot cross my path, and would gladly see him devoted, as myself, to the interests of your grace. Nor do I despair of this; he is very young, and his character cannot be entirely formed. He will tire in time of dark and solitary confinement, and gladly accept any conditions I may offer."

"Gives he any proof as yet of this yielding mood?"

"By mine honour, no, your highness; he is firm and steadfast as the ocean rock."

"Then wherefore thinkest thou he will change in time?"

"Because as yet, my gracious liege, the foul, treacherous principles of his mother have not ceased to work. An entire cessation of intercourse between them will show him his mistake at last, and this could never be, did she know he lived. Imprisoned, guarded as she is, she would yet find some means of communication with him, and all my efforts would be of no avail. Let a year roll by, and I will

stake my right hand that Alan of Buchan becomes as firm a supporter and follower of King Edward as ever his father was. Is the boy more than mortal, and does your grace think life, liberty, riches, honours will not weigh against perpetual imprisonment and daily thoughts of death?"

So spoke the Earl of Buchan, judging, as most men, others by himself, utterly unable to comprehend the high, glorious, self-devoted, patriotic spirit of his noble son. He persevered in his course of fiend-like cruelty, excusing it to his own conscience, if he had any, by the belief it would end but in his son's good—an end, indeed, he seldom thought of attaining; but there was something in the idea of a son, an heir, and one so prepossessing in appearance as Alan of Buchan, that touched his pride, the only point on which his flinty heart was vulnerable.

"So thou thinkest, sir earl," resumed the king, who perhaps in his own secret soul did not entirely think with him. "Meanwhile the stripling may laugh thy parental care to scorn, by escaping from iron chains and stone walls, and seeking out the arch rebel Bruce, make up at the sword's point for lost time. Beware, sir earl, an he be taken again thus in arms against us, even thy loyal services will not save his head!"

"I should not even ask your grace's clemency," replied the earl, his features assuming a fearful expression as he spoke. "An he thus turned traitor again to his father's house, spurning mine and your grace's favour, to join the base murderer of his kinsman, he shall be no more to me than others, whose treason hath cost their heads; but I have no fear of this. He cannot escape, guarded as he is by alike the most ruthless and the most faithful of my followers; and while there, if all else fail, I will publish that he lives, but so poison the ears of his rebel Scottish friends against him, he will not, dare not join them, and in his own despite, will be compelled to act as befitting his father's son. Trust me, my liege. To thy royal clemency I owe his life; be it my duty, then, to instil into him other principles than those which actuated him before."

"But your own character, my lord, meanwhile, care ye nought for the stain supposed to rest upon it? Thy plans sound wise, and we thank thee for thy loyalty; but we

would not ye burdened your name with a deed not its own, an ye cared for the world's applause."

"Not a whit, not a whit, your highness; countenanced by your grace's favour, absolved in your own opinion from the barbarity others charge me with, I care not for them. I have been too long mine own conscience-keeper to heed the whispers of the world," he added, his dark brows knitting closer as he spoke.

Edward smiled grimly. "Be it so, then," he said; "my Lord of Buchan, we understand each other. An that boy escapes and rejoins the traitors, and is taken, his head answers for it. An ye succeed in making him loyal as yourself, as eager a pursuer of the murderous traitor, Bruce, we will give thee the palm for policy and wisdom in our court, ourself not excepted. And now another question; it was reported Isabella of Buchan joined the rebel's court with her *two* children. Who and where is the second? we have heard but of one."

"A puny, spiritless wench, as I have heard, my liege; one little likely to affect your highness, and not worth the seeking."

"Nay, an she hath her mother's influence, we differ from thee, sir earl, and would rather see her within the walls of our court than in the traitor's train. I remember not her name amid those taken by the Bruce's wife. Hast inquired aught concerning her?"

"Not I, your grace," carelessly replied the earl; "of a truth, I had weightier thoughts than the detention or interest of a simple wench, who, if her mother has taught to forget me as her father, is not worth my remembering as a child."

"I give you joy at your most fatherly indifference, sir earl," answered the king, with an ill-suppressed sneer. "It would concern you little if she takes unto herself a husband midst your foes; the rebel Robert hath goodly brothers, and the feud between thy house and theirs may but impart a double enjoyment to the union."

The earl started, as if an adder had stung him. "She dare not do this thing," he said, fiercely; "she will not—she dare not. A thousand curses light upon her head even if she dreams it!"

"Nay, waste not thy breath in curses, good my lord, but

up and prevent the very possibility of such a thing, an it move thee so deeply. I say not it is, but some such floating rumour has reached my ears, I can scarce trace how, save through the medium of our numerous prisoners."

"But how obtain information—where seek her? I pray you pardon me, your grace, but there are a thousand furies in the thought!" and scarcely could the consciousness of the royal presence restrain the rage which gathered on the swarthy features of the earl from finding vent in words.

"Nay, nay, my lord, let not your marvellous wisdom and sage indifference be so speedily at fault. An she be not in Margaret Bruce's train, that goodly dame may give thee some information. Seek her, and may be thou wilt learn more of this wench than thou hast since her birth. In pity to this sudden interest, we grant thee permission to visit these partners of treason in their respective convents, and learn what thou canst; an she be within thy reach, be advised, and find her a husband thyself, the best and most speedy means of eradicating her mother's counsels."

Buchan's reply was arrested on his lips by the entrance of the royal chamberlain, announcing that the Earl of Berwick had arrived in all haste from Berwick, and earnestly besought a few minutes' audience with his sovereign.

"Berwick!" repeated Edward, half raising himself in his surprise from his reclining posture. Berwick! what the foul fiend brings him from his post at such a time? Bid him enter; haste, I charge thee."

His impatient command was speedily obeyed. The Earl of Berwick was close on the heels of the chamberlain, and now appeared, his lowly obedience not concealing from the quick eye of his master that wrath, black as a thunder-cloud, was resting on his brow.

"How now," said the king, "what means this unseemly gear, sir earl? thou must have neither rested spur nor slackened rein, methinks, an thy garb tell truth; and wherefore seekest thou our presence in such fiery haste? Wouldst thou be private? My Lord of Buchan, thou hadst best follow our counsel ere thy interest cools."

"Nay, your grace, bid not yon noble earl depart to grant me hearing; I would speak before him, aye, and the whole court, were it needed. 'Tis but to lay the sword and

mantle, with which your highness invested me as governor of the citadel of Berwick, at your grace's feet, and beseech you to accept my resignation of the same." With well-affected humility the Earl of Berwick unclasped his jewelled mantle, and kneeling down, laid it with his sheathed sword at King Edward's feet, remaining on his knee.

"Art craven, fool, or traitor?" demanded Edward, when his astonishment permitted words. "What means this? Speak out, and instantly; we are not wont to be thus trifled with. My Lord of Berwick, wherefore dost thou do this?"

"Not because I am a craven, good my liege," replied the nobleman, still on his knee, "for had I been so, King Edward's penetration would have discovered it ere he intrusted me with so great a charge—nor because I am a witless fool, unconscious of the high honour I thus tamely resign—and not because I am a traitor, gracious sovereign, for 'tis from insult and interruption in the arrest of a blasphemous traitor I am here."

"Insult—interruption!" fiercely exclaimed the king, starting up. "Who has dared—who loves his life so little as to do this? But speak on, speak on, we listen."

"Pardon me, your highness, I came to tender my resignation, not an accusation," resumed the wily earl, cautiously lashing his sovereign into fury, aware that it was much easier to gain what he wished in such moods than as he found him now. "I came but to beseech your highness to resume that which your own royal hands had given me. My authority trampled upon, my loyalty insulted, my zeal in your grace's service derided, my very men compelled, perforce of arms, to disobey me, and this by one high in your grace's estimation, nay, connected with your royal self. Surely, my gracious liege, I do but right in resigning the high honour your highness bestowed. I can have little merit to retain it, an such things be."

"But they shall not be, sir. As there is a God above us, they shall not be!" exclaimed the King, in towering wrath, and striking his hand on a small table of crystal near him with such violence as to shiver it to pieces. "By heaven and hell! they shall repent this, be it mine own son who hath been thus insolent. Speak out, I tell thee, as thou

lovest thy life, speak out ; drive me not mad by this cautiously-worded tale. Who hath dared trample on authority mine own hand and seal hath given—who is the traitor ? Speak out, I charge thee !” and strengthened by his own passion, the king sate upright on his couch, clenching his hand till the blood sprung, and fixing his dark, fiery eyes on the earl. It was the mood he had tried for, and now artfully and speciously, with many additions, he narrated all that had passed the preceding day in the castle-yard of Berwick. Fiercer and fiercer waxed the wrath of the king.

“Fling him in the lowest dungeon, load him with the heaviest fetters hands can forge !” were the words first distinguished, when passion permitted articulation. “The villain, the black-faced traitor ! it is not enough he hath dared raise arms against me, but he must beard me to the very teeth, defy me in my very palace, throw scorn upon me, maltreat an officer of mine own person ! Is there no punishment but death for this foul insolence ? As there is a God in heaven, he shall feel my vengeance ere he reach the scaffold—feel it, aye, till death be but too welcome !” He sunk back, exhausted by his own violence ; but not a minute passed ere he again burst forth. “And Hereford, the traitor Hereford, he dared defend him ! dared assault thee in the pursuance of thy duty, the audacious insolent ! Doth he think, forsooth, his work in Scotland will exempt him from the punishment of insolence, of treason ? as an aider and abettor of treachery he shares its guilt, and shall know whom he hath insulted. Back to thy citadel, my Lord of Berwick, see to the strict incarceration of this foul branch of treachery, aye, and look well about ye, lest any seditious citizen or soldier hath, by look or word, given aught of encouragement, or failed in due respect to our proclamation. An Hereford abet the traitor, others may but be too willing to do the like. By heaven, they shall share his fate ! Bid Hereford hither on the instant, say nought of having been beforehand with him ; I would list the insolent’s own tale. Rest thee a brief while, my lord, and our great seal shall ensure thee prompt obedience. Bid Sir Edmund Stanley attend us, my Lord of Buchan, I need scarce warn a Comyn to be secret on what has passed ; I would not have the foul insolence cast into our teeth as yet

proclaimed. Begone, both of ye ; we would be a brief space alone.

The deadly pallor which had usurped the flush of fury on the monarch's cheek afforded such strong evidence of a sharp renewal of his internal pains, that both noblemen hesitated to obey. The damp of agony stood upon his forehead a moment in large drops, then absolutely poured down his cheeks, while his gaunt frame shook with the effort to suppress the groan which his throes wrung from him. Seizing a cordial near him, Buchan presented it on his knee, but Edward only waved them both away, angrily and impatiently pointing to the door. He loved not the weakness of an appalling disease to be witnessed by his courtiers. When utterly incapacitated from either the appearance or functions of the sovereign, he chose to be alone, his pride scarcely brooking even the cares of his young and beautiful wife, or the yet wiser and truer affection of his daughters. The effects of this interview will be seen in a future chapter.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THERE was an expression of both sorrow and care on the fine and winning features of the Princess Joan, Countess of Gloucester, as she sat busied in embroidery in an apartment of Carlisle Castle, often pausing to rest her head upon her hand, and glance out of the broad casement near which she sat, not in admiration of the placid scene which stretched beyond, but in the mere forgetfulness of uneasy thought. Long the favourite daughter of King Edward, perchance because her character more resembled that of her mother, Queen Eleanor, than did either of her sisters, she had till lately possessed unbounded influence over him. Not only his affection but his pride was gratified in her, for he saw much of his own wisdom, penetration, and high sense of honour reflected upon her, far more forcibly than in his weak and yielding son. But lately, the change which had so painfully darkened the character and actions of her father had extended even to her. Her affection for a long time blinded her to this painful truth, but by slow degrees it became too evident to be mistaken, and she had wept many bitter tears, less

perhaps for herself than for her father, whom she had almost idolized. His knightly qualities, his wisdom, the good he had done his country, all were treasured up by her and rejoiced in with never-failing delight. His reputation, his popularity, were dear to her, even as her noble husband's. She had not only loved, she had revered him as some superior being who had come but to do good, to leave behind him through succeeding ages an untarnished name, enshrined in such love, England would be long ere she spoke it without tears. And now, alas! she had outlived such dreams; her reverence, lingering still, had been impaired by deeds of blood; her pride in him crushed; nought but a daughter's love remaining, which did but more strongly impress upon her heart the fatal change. And now the last blow was given; he shunned her, scarcely ever summoned her to his presence, permitted the wife of a day to tend him in his sufferings, rather than the daughter of his former love, one hallowed by the memories of her mother, the beloved and faithful partner of his youth.

It was not, however, these thoughts which entirely engrossed her now not undivided sorrows. Her sister Elizabeth, the Countess of Hereford, had just left her, plunged in the deepest distress, from the extraordinary fact that her husband, summoned seemingly in all amity by the king, had been arrested by the Lord Marshal of England as an aider and abettor of treason, and was now in strict confinement within the castle; not permitted to embrace his wife and children, whom he had not seen since his arrival from Scotland, where he had so gallantly assisted the cause of Edward, and whence he had just returned in triumph. No other cause was assigned save having given countenance to treason and *lèse majesté*, but that the irritation of the king had prohibited all hope of present pardon. She, Lady Hereford, though his own daughter, having been refused admission to his presence. Both the Earl and Countess of Gloucester had anxiously striven to comfort the anxious wife, conquering their own fears to assure her that hers were groundless; that though from some mysterious cause at present irritated, as they knew too well a trifle made him now, Hereford was too good and loyal a subject for the king to proceed to extremities, whatever might have been his fault. Rumours of the confusion at Berwick had indeed

reached Carlisle, and it was to have them confirmed or denied, or connected with some appearance of veracity, the Earl of Gloucester had quitted the royal sisters, determining to use his influence with his sovereign, even to dare his wrath, for the release of Hereford, whose good services in Scotland deserved a somewhat different recompense. Lady Hereford, too anxious and dispirited to remain long in one place, soon departed to seek the youthful Margaret of France, her father's beautiful wife, and beseech her influence with him, either for the pardon of her husband, or at least communication with him.

It was these sad thoughts which engrossed the Princess Joan, and they lingered too on Hereford's prisoner, the brave and noble Nigel, for both to her husband and herself he had been in his boyhood an object not only of interest but of love. His beauty, his extraordinary talents, had irresistibly attracted them; and yet scarcely could they now believe the youthful knight, with whose extraordinary valour not only Scotland but England rung, could be that same enthusiast boy. That he had been taken, was now a prisoner in Berwick Castle, on whom sentence of death sooner or later would be passed, brought conviction but too sadly to their hearts, and made them feel yet more bitterly their influence with Edward was of no account.

"Hast thou succeeded, Gilbert? Oh, say that poor Elizabeth may at least be permitted access to her husband," was the countess's eager salutation to her husband, as he silently approached her. He shook his head sorrowfully.

"Alas! not even this. Edward is inexorable, possessed by I know not what spirit of oppression and wrath, furiously angered against Hereford, to the utter forgetfulness of all his gallant deeds in Scotland."

"But wherefore? What can have chanced in this brief period to occasion this? but a few days since he spoke of Hereford as most loyal and deserving."

"Aye, that was on the news of Kildrummie's surrender; now forgotten, from anger at a deed which but a few years back he would have been the first to have admired. That rash madman, Nigel Bruce, hath not only trebly sealed his own fate, but hurled down this mishap on his captor," and briefly he narrated all he had learned.

"It was, indeed, a rash action, Gilbert; yet was it altogether

unnatural? Alas, no! the boy had had no spark of chivalry or patriotism about him, had he stood tamely by; and Gloucester," she added, with bitter tears, "years back would my father have given cause for this—would he thus have treated an unhappy woman, thus have added insult to misery, for an act which, shown to other than his rival, he would have honoured, aye, not alone the deed, but the doer of it? If we, his own children, feel shamed and indignant at this cruelty, oh, what must be the feelings of her countrymen, her friends?"

"Then thou believest not the foul slander attached to the Countess of Buchan, my Joan."

"Believe it!" she answered, indignantly; "who that has looked on that noble woman's face can give it the smallest credence? No, Gilbert, no. 'Tis published by those base spirits so utterly incapable of honour, knighthood, and patriotism themselves, that they cannot conceive these qualities in others, particularly in a female breast, and therefore assign it to motives black as the hearts which thought them; and even if it were true, is a kingly conqueror inflicting justice for treason against himself, to assign other motives for that justice? Doth he not lower himself—his own cause?"

"Alas, yes!" replied her husband, sorrowfully; "he hath done his character more injury by this last act than any which preceded. Though men might wish less blood were shed, yet still, traitors taken in arms against his person justice must condemn; but a woman, a sad and grieving woman—but do not weep thus, my gentle wife," he added, tenderly.

"Can a daughter of Edward do other than weep, my husband? Oh, if I loved him not, if my very spirit did not cling round him so closely that the fibres of both seem entwined, and his deeds of wrath, of exacting justice, fall on me as if I had done them, and overwhelm me with their shame, their remorse, then indeed I might not weep; but as it is, do not chide me, Gilbert, for weep I must."

"Thou art too noble-hearted, Joan," he said, kindly, as he circled her waist with his arm, "only too noble-hearted for these fearful times. 'Tis but too sad a proof of the change in thy royal father, that he shuns thy presence now even as he once loved it."

A confusion in the passage and ante-room disturbed their

converse, and Gloucester turned towards the door to inquire the cause.

"'Tis but a troublesome boy, demanding access to her highness the countess, my lord," was the reply. "I have asked his name and business, questions he deigns not, forsooth, to answer, and looks so wild and distracted, that I scarce think it accords with my duty to afford him admittance. He is no fit recipient of my lady's bounty, good my lord; trust me, he will but fright her."

"I have no such fear, my good Baldwin," said the princess, as, on hearing her name, she came forward to the centre of the chamber; "thou knowest my presence is granted to all who seek it, and this poor child seems so wild, he is the fitter object of my care. They are using violence methinks; give him entrance instantly."

The attendant departed, and returned in a very brief space, followed by a lad, whose torn and muddy garments, haggard features, and dishevelled hair indeed verified the description given. He glanced wildly round him a moment, and then flinging himself at the feet of the princess, clasped her robe and struggled to say something, of which the words "mercy, protection" were alone audible.

"Mercy, my poor child! what mercy dost thou crave? Protection I may give thee, but how may I show thee mercy?"

"Grant me but a few moments, lady, let me but speak with thee alone. I bear a message which I may not deliver to other ears save thine," said or rather gasped the boy, for he breathed with difficulty, either from exhaustion or emotion.

"Alone!" replied the countess, somewhat surprised. "Leave us, Baldwin," she added, after a moment's pause. "I am privately engaged for the next hour, denied to all, save his grace the king." He withdrew, with a respectful bow. "And now, speak, poor child, what wouldst thou? Nay, I hear nothing which my husband may not hear," she said, as the eyes of her visitor gazed fearfully on the earl, who was looking at him with surprise.

"Thy husband, lady—the earl of Gloucester? oh, it was to him too I came; the brother-in-arms of my sovereign, once that showed kindness to—to Sir Nigel in his youth, ye will not, ye will not forsake him now?"

Few and well-nigh inarticulate as were those broken words, they betrayed much which at once excited interest in both the earl and countess, and told the reason of the lad's earnest entreaty to see them alone.

"Forsake him !" exclaimed the earl, after carefully examining that the door was closed ; "would to heaven I could serve him, free him ! that there was but one slender link to lay hold of, to prove him innocent and give him life, I would do it, did it put my own head in jeopardy."

"And is there none, none?" burst wildly from the boy's lips, as he sprung from his knees, and grasped convulsively the earl's arm. "Oh, what has he done that they should slay him ? why do they call him guilty ? He was not Edward's subject, he owed him no homage, no service, he has but fought to free his country, and is there guilt in this ? oh, no, no ; save him, in mercy save him !"

"Thou knowest not what thou askest, boy, how wholly, utterly impossible it is to save him. He hath hurled down increase of anger on his own head by his daring insult of King Edward's herald ; had there been hope before there is none now."

A piercing cry escaped the boy, and he would have fallen, had he not been supported by the countess ; he looked at her pitying face, and again threw himself at her feet.

"Canst *thou* not, wilt *thou* not save him ?" he cried ; "art thou not the daughter of Edward, his favourite, his dearly beloved, and will he not list to thee—will he not hear thy pleadings ? Oh, seek him, kneel to him as I to thee, implore his mercy—life, life, only the gift of life ; sentence him to exile, perpetual exile, what he will, only let him live, he is too young, too good, too beautiful to die. Oh ! do not look as if this could not be. He has told me how you both loved him, not that I should seek ye. It is not at his request I come ; no, no, no, he spurns life, if it be granted on conditions. But they have torn me from him, they have borne him to the lowest dungeon, they have loaded him with fetters, put him to the torture. I would have clung to him still, but they spurned me, trampled on me, cast me forth—to die, if I may not save him ! Wilt thou not have mercy, princess ? daughter of Edward, oh, save him, save him !"

It is impossible in the above incoherent words to convey to the reader even a faint idea of the agonized wildness

with which they were spoken ; the impression of unutterable misery they gave to those who listened to them, and marked their reflection in the face of the speaker.

"Fetters — the lowest dungeon — torture," repeated Gloucester, pacing up and down, with disordered steps. "Can these things be? merciful heaven, how low hath England fallen! Boy, boy can it be thou speakest truth?"

"As there is a God above, it is truth!" he answered, passionately. "Oh, canst thou not save him from this? is there no justice, no mercy? Rise—no, no; wherefore should I rise?" he continued, clinging convulsively to the knees of the princess, as she soothingly sought to raise him. "I will kneel here till thou hast promised to plead for him with thy royal father, promised to use thine influence for his life. Oh, canst thou once have loved him and yet hesitate for this?"

"I do not, I would not hesitate, unhappy boy," replied the princess, tenderly. "God in heaven knows, were there the slenderest chance of saving him, I would kneel at my father's feet till pardon was obtained, but angered as he is now it would irritate him yet more. Alas! alas! poor child, they told thee wrong who bade thee come to Joan for influence with Edward; I have none now, less than any of his court," and the large tears fell from the eyes of the princess on the boy's upturned face.

"Then let me plead for him; give me access to Edward. Oh, I will so beseech, conjure him, he cannot, he will not say me nay. Oh, if his heart be not of steel, he will have mercy on our wretchedness; he will pardon, he will spare my husband!"

The sob with which the last word was spoken shook that slight frame, till it bowed to the very ground, and the supporting arm of the countess alone preserved her from falling.

"Thy husband!—Gracious heaven! who and what art thou?" exclaimed the earl, springing towards her, at the same instant that his wife raised her in her arms, and laid her on a couch beside them, watching with the soothing tenderness of a sister, till voice and strength returned.

"Alas! I feared there was more in this deep agony than we might see," she said; "but I imagined not, dared not imagine aught like this. Poor unhappy sufferer, the saints

be praised thou hast come to me ! thy husband's life I may not save, but I can give protection, tenderness to thee—aye weep, weep, there is life, reason in those tears.”

The gentle voice of sympathy, of kindness, had come upon that overcharged heart, and broke the icy agony which had closed it to the relief of tears. Mind and frame were utterly exhausted, and Agnes buried her face in the hands of the princess, which she had clasped convulsively within both hers, and wept, till the wildness of agony indeed departed, but not the horrible consciousness of the anguish yet to come. Gradually her whole tale was imparted: from the resolution to follow her betrothed even to England, cling to him to the last ; the fatal conclusion of that rite which had made them one ; the anxiety and suffering which had marked the days spent in effecting a complete disguise, ere she could venture near him and obtain Hereford's consent to her attending him as a page ; the risks and hardships which had attended their journey to Berwick, till even a prison seemed a relief and rest ; and then the sudden change, that a few days previous, the Earl of Berwick had entered Sir Nigel's prison, at the head of five or ten ruffians, had loaded him with fetters, conveyed him to the lowest and filthiest dungeon, and there had administered the torture, she knew not wherefore. Her shriek of agony had betrayed that she had followed them, and she was rudely and forcibly dragged from him, and thrust from the fortress. Her brain had reeled, her senses a brief while forsaken her, and when she recovered, her only distinct thought was to find her way to Carlisle, and there obtain access to the Earl and Countess of Gloucester, of whom her husband had spoken much during their journey to England, not with any wish or hope of obtaining mercy through their influence, but simply as the friends of former years ; he had spoken of them to while away the tedious hours of their journey, and besought her, if she should be parted from him on their arrival at Berwick, to seek them, and implore their protection till her strength was restored. Of herself, however, in thus seeking them, she had thought not ; the only idea, the only thought clearly connected in her mind was to beseech their influence with Edward in obtaining her husband's pardon. Misery and anxiety, in a hundred unlooked-for shapes, had already shown the fallacy of

those dreams which in the hour of peril had strengthened her, and caused her to fancy that when once his wife she not only might abide by him, but that she might in some manner obtain his liberation. She did not, indeed, lament her fate was joined to his—lament! she could not picture herself other than she was, by her husband's side, but she felt, how bitterly felt, she had no power to avert his fate. Despair was upon her, cold, black, clinging despair, and she clung to the vain dream of imploring Edward's mercy, feeling at the same moment it was but the *ignis fatui* to her heart—urging, lighting, impelling her on, but to sink in pitchy darkness when approached.

Gradually and painfully this narrative of anguish was drawn from her lips, often unconnectedly, often incoherently, but the earl and countess heard enough to fill their hearts alike with pity and respect for the deep, unselfish love unconsciously revealed. She had told, too, her maiden name, had conjured them to conceal her from the power of her father, at whose very name she shuddered; and both those noble hearts shared her anxiety, sympathised in her anguish; and speedily she felt, if there could be comfort in such deep wretchedness, she had told her tale to those ready and willing, and able to bestow it.

The following day the barons sat in judgment on Sir Nigel Bruce, and Gloucester was obliged to join them. It was useless, both he and the princess felt; to implore the king's mercy till sentence was passed; alas! it was useless at any time, but it must have been a colder and harder heart than the Princess Joan's to look upon the face of Agnes, and yet determine on not even making one effort in his favour. At first the unhappy girl besought the earl to permit her to accompany him back to Berwick, to attend her husband on his trial; but on his proving it would but be uselessly harrowing the feelings of both, for it would not enable her to go back with him to prison, that it would be better for her to remain under the protection of the countess, endeavouring to regain strength for whatever she might have to encounter, either to accompany him to exile, if grace were indeed granted, or to return to her friends in Scotland, she yielded mournfully, deriving some faint degree of comfort in the earl's assurance that she should rejoin her husband as soon as possible, and the countess's promise

that if she wished it, she should herself be witness of her interview with Edward. It was indeed poor comfort, but her mind was well-nigh wearied out with sorrow, as if incapable of bearing more, and she acquiesced from very exhaustion.

The desire that she herself could conjure the mercy of Edward had been negatived even to her anxious heart by the assurance of both the earl and the princess, that instead of doing good to her husband's cause she would but sign her own doom, perchance be consigned to the power of her father, and be compelled to relinquish the poor consolation of being with her husband to the last. It was better she should retain the disguise she had assumed, adopting merely in addition the dress of one of the princess's own pages, a measure which would save her from all observation in the palace, and give her admittance to Sir Nigel perchance, when as his own attendant it would be denied.

The idea of rejoining her husband would have reconciled Agnes to anything that might have been proposed, and kneeling at the feet of her protectress, she struggled to speak her willingness and blessing on her goodness, but her tongue was parched, her lips were mute, and the princess turned away, for her gentle spirit could not read unmoved the silent thankfulness of that young and breaking heart.

CHAPTER XXIV.

It would be useless to linger on the trial of Nigel Bruce, in itself a mockery of justice, as were all those which had preceded, and all that followed it. The native nobility of Scotland were no subjects of the king of England; they owed him homage perchance, for lands held in England, but on flocking to the standard of the Bruce these had at once been voluntarily forfeited, and they fought but as Scottish men determined to throw off the yoke of a tyrant whose arms had overrun a land to which he had no claim. They fought for the freedom of a country, for their own liberty, and therefore were no traitors; but these facts availed not with the ruthless sovereign, to whom opposition was treason. The mockery of justice proceeded, it gave a deeper impres-

sion, a graver solemnity to their execution, and therefore for not one of his prisoners was the ceremony dispensed with. Sir Christopher Seaton had been conveyed to the Tower, with his wife, under pretence of there waiting till his wounds were cured, to abide his trial, and in that awful hour Sir Nigel stood alone. Yet he was undaunted, for he feared not death, even at the hangman's hand; his spirit was at peace, for he was innocent of sin; unbowed, for he was no traitor—he was a patriot warrior still. Pale he was indeed, ashy pale, but it told a tale of intense bodily anguish. They had put him to the torture, to force from his lips the place of his brother's retreat, that being the only pretence on which the rage of Edward and the malice of Berwick could rest for the infliction of their cruelty. They could drag nought from his lips; they could not crush that exalted soul, or compel it to utter more than a faint, scarcely articulate groan, as proof that he suffered, that the beautiful frame was well-nigh shattered unto death. And now he stood upright, unshrinking; and there were hearts amid those peers inwardly grieving at their fell task, gazing on him with unfeigned admiration; while others gloried that another obstacle to their sovereign's schemes of ambition would be removed, finding, perchance, in his youth, beauty, and noble bearing, from their contrast with themselves, but fresh incentives to the doom of death, and determining, even as they sate and scowled on him, to aggravate the bitterness of that doom with all the ignominy that cruelty could devise.

He had listened in stern silence to the indictment, and evinced no sign of emotion even when, in the virulence of some witnesses against him, the most degrading epithets were lavished on himself, his family, and friends. Only once had his eye flashed fire and his cheek burned, and his right hand unconsciously sought where his weapon should have hung, when his noble brother was termed a ribald assassin, an excommunicated murderer; but quickly he checked that natural emotion, and remained collected as before. He was silent till the usual question was asked, "if he had anything to say why the sentence of death should not be pronounced upon him?" and then he made a step forward, looked boldly and sternly around him, and spoke in a rich, musical voice, the following brief though emphatic words:—

"Ye ask me if I can say aught why the sentence of death should not be pronounced. Nobles of England, in denying the charge of treason with which ye have indicted me, I have said enough. Before ye, aye, before your sovereign, I have done nothing to merit death, save that death which a conqueror bestows on his captive, when he deems him too powerful to live. The death of a traitor I protest against; for to the king of England I am no subject, and in consequence no traitor! I have but done that which every true and honourable man must justify, and in justifying respect. I have sought with my whole heart the liberty of my country, the interest of my lawful sovereign, and will die asserting the honour and justice of my cause, even as I have lived. I plead not for mercy, for were it offered, on condition of doing homage unto Edward, I would refuse it, and choose death; protesting to the last that Robert Bruce, and he alone, is rightful king of Scotland. My lords, in condemning me to death as a captive taken in war, ye may be justified by the law of battles, I dispute not the justice of your doom; but an ye sentence me as a traitor, I do deny the charge, and say my condemnation is unjust and foul, and ye are perjured in its utterance. I have said. Now let your work proceed."

He folded his arms on his breast, and awaited in unbroken silence his doom. A brief pause had followed his words. The Earl of Gloucester, who, from his rank and near connection with the king, occupied one of the seats of honour at the upper end of the large hall, and had during the trial vainly sought to catch the prisoner's eye, now reclined back on his seat, his brow resting on his hand, his features completely concealed by the dark drapery of his cloak. In that position he remained, not only during the pause but while the fatal sentence was pronounced.

"By the laws of your country, and the sentence of your peers," so it ran, "you, Nigel Bruce, by manifold acts of rebellion, disaffection, and raising up arms against your lawful king, Edward, the sovereign of England and Scotland, and all the realms, castles, and lordships thereto pertaining, are proved guilty of high treason and *lèse majesté*, and are thereby condemned to be divested of all symbols of nobility and knighthood, which you have disgraced; to be dragged on a hurdle to the common gibbet, and there

hung by the neck till you are dead ; your head to be cut off ; your body quartered and exposed at the principal towns as a warning to the disaffected and the traitorous of all ranks in either nation, and this is to be done at whatsoever time the good pleasure of our sovereign lord the king may please to appoint. God save King Edward, and so perish all his foes !”

Not a muscle of the prisoner's face had moved during the utterance of this awful sentence. He had glanced fearlessly around him to the last, his eye resting on the figure of the Earl of Gloucester with an expression of pitying commiseration for a moment, as if he felt for him, for his deep regret in his country's shame, infinitely more than for himself. Proudly erect he held himself, as they led him in solemn pomp from the great hall of the castle, across the court to the dungeons of the condemned, gazing calmly and unflinchingly on the axe, which carried with its edge towards him proclaimed him condemned, though his doom was more ignominious than the axe bestowed. There was a time when he had shrunk from the anticipated agony of a degradation so complete as this—but not now ; his spirit was already lifted up above the honours and humiliation of earth. But one dream of this world remained—one sad, sweet dream clung to his heart and bound it with silver chains below. Where was that gentle being ? He fondly hoped she had sought the friends of his boyhood, as he had implored her, should they be parted ; he strove to realize comfort in the thought they would protect and save her the agony of the final parting ; but he strove in vain. One wild yearning possessed him, to gaze upon her face, to fold her to his heart once, but once again, it was the last lingering remnant of mortality ; he had not another thought of life but this, and this grew stronger as its hope seemed vain. But there was one near to give him comfort, when he expected it not.

Wrapped so closely in his dark, shrouding mantle that nought but the drooping feather of his cap could be distinguished, the Earl of Gloucester drew near the prisoner, and as he paused, ere the gates and bars of the prison entrance could be drawn back, whispered hurriedly yet emphatically—

“A loved one is safe and shall be so. Would to God I could do more !”

Suppressing with extreme difficulty a start of relief and surprise, the young nobleman glanced once on Gloucester's face, pressed his hands together, and answered, in the same tone—

"God in heaven bless thee! I would see her once, only once more, if it can be without danger to her; it is life's last link, I cannot snap it—parted thus." They hurried him through the entrance with the last word lingering on his lips, and before Gloucester could make even a sign of reply.

Early in the evening of the same day, King Edward was reclining on his couch, in the chamber we have before described, and, surrounded by some few of his favourite noblemen, appeared so animated by a new cause of excitement as to be almost unconscious of the internal pains which even at that moment were more than usually intense. His courtiers looked on unconcernedly while, literally shaking with disease and weakness, he coolly and deliberately traced those letters which gave a base and ignominious death to one of the best, the noblest, loveliest spirits that ever walked the earth, and signed the doom of misery and madness to another; and yet no avenging hand stretched forth between him and his victim, no pang was on his heart to bid him pause, be merciful, and spare. Oh what would this earth be were it all in all, and what were life if ending in the grave? Faith, thou art the crystal key opening to the spirit the glorious vision of immortality, bidding the trusting heart, when sick and weary of the dark deeds and ruthless spoilers of this lovely earth, rest on thy downy wings, and seek for peace and comfort there.

"Who waits?" demanded the king, as his pen ceased in its task.

"Sir Stephen Fitzjohn, my liege, sent by the Earl of Berwick with the warrant for which he waits."

"He need wait no longer then, for it is there. Two hours before noon the traitor dies; we give him grace till then, that our good subjects of Berwick may take warning by his fate, and our bird in the cage witness the end of the gallant so devoted to her cause. Bid the knight begone, my Lord of Arundel; he hath too long waited our pleasure. Ha! whom have we here? who craves admittance thus loudly?" he added, observing, as the earl lifted the hangings to depart,

some bustle in the ante-room. "Who is it so boldly demanding speech with us?"

"Her Highness the Princess Joan, Countess of Gloucester, please you, my liege," replied the chamberlain; "she will not take denial."

"Is it so hard a thing for a daughter to gain admittance to a father, even though he be a sovereign?" interrupted the princess, who, attended only by a single page bearing her train, advanced within the chamber, her firm and graceful deportment causing the lords to fall back on either side, and give her passage, though the expression of their monarch's countenance denoted the visit was unwelcome.

"Humbly and earnestly I do beseech your grace's pardon for this over-bold intrusion," she said, bending one knee before him, "but indeed my business could not be delayed. My liege and father, grant me but a few brief minutes. Oh, for the sake of one that loved us both, the sainted one now gone to heaven, for the memory of whom thou didst once bless me with fonder love than thou gavest to my sisters, because my features bore her stamp, my king, my father, pardon me and let me speak!"

"Speak on," muttered the king, passing his hand over his features, and turning slightly from her, if there were emotion, to conceal it. "Thou hast, in truth, been over-bold, yet as thou art here, speak on. What wouldst thou?"

"A boon, a mighty boon, most gracious father; one, only thou canst grant, one that in former years thou wouldst have loved me for the asking, and blessed me by fulfilment," she said, as she continued to kneel, and by her beseeching voice and visible emotion effectually confining the attention of the courtiers, now assembled in a knot at the farther end of the apartment, and preventing their noticing the deportment of the page who had accompanied her; he was leaning against a marble pillar which supported the canopy raised over the king's couch, his head bent on his breast, the short thick curls which fell over his forehead concealing his features: his hands too, crossed on his breast, convulsively clenched the sleeves of his doublet, as if to restrain the trembling, which, had any one been sufficiently near, or even imagined him worthy of a distant glance, must have been observable pervading his whole frame.

"A boon," repeated the king, as the princess paused, almost breathless with her own emotion, "a mighty boon! What can the Countess of Gloucester have to ask of me, that it moves her thus? Are we grown so terrible that even our own children tremble ere they speak? What is this mighty boon? we grant not without hearing."

"'Tis the boon of life, my liege, of life thou canst bestow. Oh, while in this world thou rulest, vicegerent of the King of kings on high, combining like Him justice and mercy, in the government of his creatures, oh! like him, let mercy predominate over justice; deprive not of life, in the bloom, the loveliness of youth! Be merciful, my father, oh, be merciful! forgive as thou wouldst be forgiven—grant me the life I crave!"

Urged on by emotion, the princess had scarcely heard the suppressed interjection of the king which her first words had occasioned, and she scarcely saw the withering sternness which gathered on his brow.

"Thou hast in truth learnt oratory, most sapient daughter," he said, bitterly; "thou pleadest well and flowingly, yet thou hast said not for whom thou bearest this marvellous interest—it can scarce be for a traitor? Methinks the enemies of Edward should be even such unto his children."

"Yet 'tis for one of these mistaken men I plead, most gracious sovereign," resumed Joan, intimidated not by his sarcasm. "Oh, my father, the conqueror's triumph consists not in the number of rebellious heads that fall before him—not in the blood that overflows his way; magnanimity, mercy, will conquer yet more than his victorious sword. Traitor as he seem, have mercy on Nigel Bruce; oh, give—"

"Mercy on a Bruce! May the thunder of heaven blast me when I show it!" burst furiously from Edward's lips, as he started upon his couch and gazed on his suppliant child with eyes that seemed absolutely to blaze in wrath. "Mercy on a branch of that house which has dared defy me, dared to insult my power, trample on my authority, upraised the standard of rebellion, and cost me the lives of thousands of my faithful subjects! Mercy on him, the daring traitor who, even in his chains, has flung redoubled insult

and treason into our very teeth! Mercy—may the God of heaven deny me all mercy when I show it unto him!”

“Oh, no, no, my father! My father, in mercy speak not such terrible words!” implored the princess, clinging to his robe. “Call not the wrath of heaven on thy head; think of his youth, the temptations that have beset him, the difficult task to remain faithful when all other of his house turned astray. Mistaken as he hath been, as he is, have mercy. Compel him to prove, to feel, to acknowledge thou art not the tyrant he hath been taught to deem thee; exile, imprisonment, all—anything, but death. Oh, do not turn from me; be thyself, the good, the magnanimous Edward of former days, have mercy on thy foe!”

“I tell thee, never! by every saint in heaven, I tell thee, never!” shouted the king. “I will hear no more; begone, lest I deem my own child part and parcel of the treasons formed against me. Trouble me not with these vain prayers. I will not pardon, I have sworn it; begone, and learn thy station better than to plead for traitors. Thy husband braved me once; beware, lest in these pleadings I hear *his* voice again. I tell him and thee that ere to-morrow’s noon be passed the soul of Nigel Bruce shall stand in judgment; not another day, not another hour he lives to blast me with the memory of his treason. The warrant hath been signed, and is on its way to Berwick, to give his body to the hangman and his soul to Satan—his death is sealed.”

“Oh, no, no, no!” shrieked a voice of sudden anguish, startling all who heard, and even Edward, by its piteous tones, and the form of a page suddenly fell prostrate before the monarch. “Mercy, mercy! for the love of God, have mercy!” he struggled to articulate, but there was no sound save a long and piercing shriek, and the boy lay senseless on the ground.

“Ha! by St. George, bearest thou me with traitors in my very palace, before my very eyes?” exclaimed the angry monarch, as his astonished courtiers gathered round. “Put him in ward; away with him, I say!”

“Pardon me, your highness, but this is needless,” interposed the princess, with a calm majesty, that subdued even the irritation of her father, and undauntedly waving back the courtiers, although perfectly sensible of the imminent danger in which she was placed. “If there be blame, let it be visited

on me ; this poor child has been ill and weakly from many causes, terrified, almost maddened, by sounds, and sights of blood. I deemed him perfectly recovered, or he had not attended me here. I pray your grace permit his removal to my apartments."

The king laid a heavy hand on his daughter's arm as she stood beside him, and fixed a gaze on her face that would have terrified any less noble spirit into a betrayal of the truth, but firm in her own integrity, in her own generous purpose, she calmly and inquiringly returned his gaze.

"Go to, thou art a noble wench, though an over-bold and presuming one," he said, in a much mollified tone, for there was that in the dauntless behaviour of his daughter which found an echo in his heart even now, deadened as it was to aught of gentle feeling, and he was glad of this interruption to entreaties which, resolved not to grant, had lashed him into fury, while her presence made him feel strangely ashamed. "Do as thou wilt with thine own attendants ; but be advised, tempt not thine own safety again ; thou hast tried us sore with thy ill-advised entreaties, but we forgive thee, on condition they are never again renewed. Speak not, we charge thee. What ho ! Sir Edmund Stanley," he called aloud, and the chamberlain appeared at the summons. "Here, let this boy be carefully raised and borne according to the pleasure of his mistress. See, too, that the Countess of Gloucester be conducted with due respect to her apartments. Begone !" he added, sternly, as the eyes of Joan still seemed to beseech mercy ; "I will hear no more—the traitor dies !"

CHAPTER XXV.

THE shades of advancing night had already appeared to have enwrapped the earth some hours, when Nigel Bruce was startled from an uneasy slumber by the creaking sounds of bolts and bars announcing the entrance of some one within the dungeon. The name of his beloved, his devoted Agnes trembled on his lips, but fearful of betraying her to unfriendly ears, he checked himself, and started up, exclaiming, "Who comes ?" No answer was vouchsafed, but the

dim light of a lamp, placed by the intruder on the floor, disclosed a figure wrapped from head to foot in the shrouding mantle of the time, not tall, but appearing a stout muscular person, banishing on the instant Nigel's scarcely-formed hope that it was the only one he longed to see.

"What wouldst thou?" he said, after a brief pause. "Doth Edward practise midnight murder? Speak, who art thou?"

"Midnight murder, thou boasting fool; I love thee not well enough to cheat the hangman of his prey," replied a harsh and grating voice, which, even without the removal of the cloak, would have revealed to Nigel's astonished ears the Earl of Buchan. "Ha! I have startled thee—thou didst not know the deadly enemy of thy accursed race!"

"I know thee now, my lord of Buchan," replied the young man, calmly; "yet know I not wherefore thou art here, save to triumph over the fallen fortunes of thy foe; if so, scorn on—I care not. A few brief hours, and all of earth and earthly feeling, is at rest."

"To triumph—scorn! I had scarce travelled for petty satisfaction such as that, when to-morrow sees thee in the hangman's hands, the scorn of thousands! Hath Buchan no other work with thee, thinkest thou? dost thou affirm thou knowest nought for which he hath good cause to seek thee?"

"Earl of Buchan, I dare affirm it," answered Nigel, proudly; "I know of nought to call for words or tones as these, save, perchance, that the love and deep respect in which I hold thine injured countess, my friendship for thy murdered son, hath widened yet more the breach between thy house and mine—it may be so; yet deem not, cruel as thou art, I will deny feelings in which I glory, at thy bidding. An thou comest to reproach me with these things, rail on, they affect me as little as thy scorn."

"Hadst thou said love for her they call my daughter, thou hadst been nearer the mark," retorted the earl, fury rapidly gaining possession of heart and voice; "but thou art too wise, too politic for that."

"Aye," retorted Nigel, after a fearful struggle with himself, "aye, thou mayest well add love for Agnes of Buchan, as well as friendship for her brother. Thinkest thou I would deny it—hide it? little dost thou know its thrilling,

its inspiring power; little canst thou know how I glory in it, cherish, linger on it still. But wherefore speak thus to thee, thou man of wickedness and blood. I love thy pure and spotless child, rejoice that thou didst so desert, so utterly neglect her, that thou couldst no more leave a shadow on her innocent heart than a cloud upon her way. I love her, glory in that love, and what is it to thee?"

"What is it to me? that a child of the house of Comyn dare hold commune with a Bruce; that thou hast dared to love a daughter of my house, aye, to retain her by thy side a willing mistress, when all others of her sex forsook thee—what is it to me? Did not to-morrow give thee to a traitor's doom, thy blood should answer thee; but as it is, villain and slave, give her to me—where is her hiding-place? speak, or the torture shall wring it from thee."

"Thinkest thou such threats will in aught avail thee?" calmly replied Nigel. "Thou knowest not the Bruce. Agnes is no longer a Comyn, no longer subject to thy guardianship. The voice of God, the rites at the altar's foot, have broken every link, save that which binds her to her husband. She is mine, before God and man is mine—mine own faithful and lawful wife!"

"Thou liest, false villain!" furiously retorted Buchan. "The church shall undo these bonds, shall give her back to the father she had thus insulted. She shall repent, repent, with tears of blood, her desertion of her race. Canst thou protect her in death, thou fool—canst thou still cherish and save her, thinkest thou, when the hangman hath done his work?"

"Aye, even then she will be cherished, loved for Nigel's sake, and for her own; there will be faithful friends around her to protect her from thee still, tyrant! Thou canst not break the bonds that bind us; thou hast done no father's part. Forsaken and forgotten, thy children owe thee no duty, no obedience; thou canst bring forward no plea to persecute thy child. In life and in death she is mine, mine alone; the power and authority thou hast spurned so long can no longer be assumed; the love, the obedience thou didst never heed, nay, trampled on, hath been transferred to one who glories in them both. She is in safety—slay, torture as thou wilt, I tell thee no more." Fettered, unarmed, firm, undauntedly erect, stood Nigel Bruce, gazing

with curling lip and flashing eyes, upon his foe. The foam had gathered on the earl's lip, his hand, clenching his sword, had trembled with passion as Nigel spoke. He sought to suppress that rage, to remember a public execution would revenge him infinitely more than a blow of his sword, but he had been too long unused to control; lashed into ungovernable fury by the demeanour of Nigel, even more than by his words, the sword flashed from its scabbard, was raised, and fell—but not upon his foe, for the earl of Gloucester suddenly stood between them.

“Art thou mad, or tired of life, my Lord of Buchan?” he said. “Knowest thou not thou art amenable to the law, and thou thus deprivest justice of her victim! Shame, shame my lord; I deemed thee not a midnight murderer.”

“Darest thou so speak to me?” replied Buchan, fiercely; “by every fiend in hell, thou shalt answer this! Begone, and meddle not with that which concerneth thee nothing.”

“It doth concern me, proud earl,” replied Gloucester, standing immediately before Nigel, whose emotion at observing the page by whom he was accompanied, though momentary, must otherwise have been observed. “The person of the prisoner is sacred to the laws of his country, the mandate of his sovereign; on thy life thou darest not injure him—thou knowest that thou darest not. Do thou begone, ere I summon those who, at the mere mention of assault on one condemned, will keep thee in ward till thou canst wreak thy vengeance on naught but clay; begone, I say!”

“I will not,” sullenly answered the earl, unwillingly conscious of the truth of his words; “I will not, till he hath answered me. Once more,” he added, turning to Nigel with a demoniac scowl, “where is she whom thou hast dared to call thy wife? answer, or as there is a hell beneath us, the torture shall wring it from thee!”

“In safety, where thine arm shall never reach her,” haughtily answered the young nobleman. “Torture! what wilt thou torture the senseless clay? Hence, I defy thee! Death will protect me from thy lawless power; death will set his seal upon me ere we meet again.”

The earl muttered a deep and terrible oath, and then he strode away, coming in such violent contact against the slight and almost paralysed form of Gloucester's page as he stood in the doorway, as nearly to throw him to the ground.

Nigel sprung forward, but was held back with a grasp of iron by the Earl of Gloucester, nor did he relinquish his hold till Buchan had passed through the doorway, till the heavy hinges had firmly closed again, and the step of the departing earl had entirely faded in distance.

"Now then, we are safe," he said; "thank heaven!" but his words were scarcely heard, for the page had bounded within the extended arms of Nigel, had clung so closely to his heart, he could feel nothing, see nothing, save that slender form; could hear nothing but those deep, agonized sobs, which are so terrible when unaccompanied by the relief of tears. For a while Nigel could not speak, he could not utter aught of comfort, for he felt it not; that moment was the bitterness of death.

"Torture! did he not speak of torture? will he not come again?" were the words that at length fell, shudderingly, from the lips of Agnes. "Nigel, Nigel, if it must be, give me up; he cannot inflict aught more of misery now."

"Fear not, lady; he dare not," hastily rejoined Gloucester. "The torture dare not be administered without consent of Edward, and that now cannot be obtained; he will not have sufficient—" time, he was going to say, but checked himself, for the agonized look of Agnes told him his meaning was more than sufficiently understood. "Nigel," he added, laying his hand on the young man's shoulder, "Nigel, my noble, gallant friend—for so I will call thee, though I sat in judgment on thee, aye, and tacitly acquiesced in thy sentence—shrink not, oh, shrink not now. I saw not a quiver on thy lip, a pallor on thy cheek, nay, nor faltering in thy step, when they read a doom at which I have marked the bravest blanch; oh, let not that noble spirit fail thee now."

"Gloucester, it shall not!" he said, with suddenly regained firmness, as supporting Agnes with his right arm he convulsively wrung the hand of his friend with the other. "It was but the sight of this beloved one, the thought—no matter, it is over. Agnes, my beloved, my own, oh, look on me! speak, tell me all that hath befallen thee since they tore thee from me, and filled my soul with darker dread for thee than for myself. To see thee with this noble earl is enough to know how heavy a burden of gratitude I

owe him, which thou, sweetest, must discharge. Yet speak to me, beloved ; tell me all, all."

Emulating his calmness, remembering even at that moment her promise not to unman him in the moment of trial by vain repinings, Agnes complied with his request. Her tale was frequently interrupted by those terrible sobs, which seemed to threaten annihilation, but Nigel could gather from it so much of tenderness and care on the part of the princess, that the deepest gratitude filled his heart and spoke in his impassioned words.

"Tell her, oh, tell her, if the prayers of the dying can in aught avail her, the blessedness of heaven shall be hers even upon earth !" he exclaimed, gazing up in the earl's face with eyes that spoke his soul. "Oh, I knew her not, when in former years I did but return her kindness with silence and reserve ; I saw in her little more than the daughter of Edward. Tell her, on my knees I beseech her pardon for that wrong ; in my last prayers I shall breathe her name."

"And wherefore didst thou go with her ?" he continued, on Agnes narrating the scene between the princess and the king. "Alas ; my gentle one, hadst thou not endured enough, that thou wouldst harrow up thy soul by hearing the confirmation of my doom from the tyrant's own ruthless lips—didst dream of pardon ? dearest, no, thou couldst not."

"Nigel, Nigel, I did, even at that moment, though they told me thou wert condemned, that nothing could save thee ; though the princess besought me almost on her knees to spare myself this useless trial, I would not listen to her. I would not believe that all was hopeless ; I dreamed still, still of pardon, that Edward would listen to his noble child, would forgive, and I thought, even if she failed, I would so plead he must have mercy, he would listen to me and grant my prayer. I did dream of pardon, but it was vain, vain ! Nigel, Nigel, why did my voice fail, my eye grow dim ? I might have won thy pardon yet."

"Beloved, thou couldst not," he answered, mournfully. "Mine own sweet Agnes, take comfort, 'tis but a brief farewell ; we shall meet where war and blood and death can never enter more."

"I know it, oh, I know it," she sobbed ; "but to part thus,

to lose thee, and by such a death, oh, it is horrible, most horrible !”

“Nay, look not on it thus, beloved ; there is no shame even in this death, if there be no shame in him who dies.”

“Shame !” she repeated ; “couldst think I could couple aught of shame with thee, my own ? even this dark fate is noble when borne by such as thee.”

Nigel held her closer to his heart, and for his sole answer pressed a quivering kiss upon her cheek. Gloucester, who had been in earnest commune with the sentinel without the door, now returned, and informed him that the soldier, who was well known to him and who much disliked his present watch, had willingly consented that the page (whom Gloucester had represented as a former attendant of Sir Nigel’s, though now transferred to his service) should remain with his former master, on condition that the earl would come for him before the priests and others who were to attend him to the scaffold entered the dungeon, as this departure from the regular prison discipline, shown as it was to one against whom the king was unusually irritated, might cost him his head. Gloucester had promised faithfully, and he offered them the melancholy option of parting now, or a few sad hours hence.

“Let me, do let me stay ; Nigel, my husband, send me not from thee now !” exclaimed Agnes, sinking at his feet and clasping his knees. “I will not weep, nor moan, nor in aught afflict thee. Nigel, dearest Nigel, I will not leave thee now.”

“But is it wise, is it well, my best beloved ? think, if in the deep anguish of to-morrow thy disguise be penetrated, thy sex discovered, and thy cruel father claim thee, dragging thee even from the protection of the princess—oh, the bitterness of death were doubled then ! Thou thinkest but of me, mine own, but thy safety, thy future peace is all now left for me.”

“Safety, peace—oh, do not, do not mock me, Nigel—where are they for poor Agnes, save in her husband’s grave ? What is life now, that thou should’st seek to guard it ? no, no, I will abide by thee, thou shalt not send me hence.”

“But to-morrow, lady, to-morrow,” interposed Gloucester,

with deep commiseration. "I would not, from any selfish fear, shorten by one minute the few sad hours ye may yet pass together, but bethink ye, I dare not promise to shield thee from the horror of to-morrow, for I cannot. Fearful scenes and sounds may pass before thee; thou mayest come in contact with men from whom thou wilt shrink in horror, and though thine own safety be of little worth, remember the betrayal of thy sex and rank may hurl down the royal vengeance on the head of thy protectress, daughter of Edward though she be. Canst thou be firm—wilt thou, canst thou await the morrow?"

"Yes," answered Agnes, the wildness of her former accents subsiding into almost solemnity; "the safety of thy noble countess shall not be hazarded through me. Leave me with my husband, add but this last mercy to the many thou hast showered on me, and the blessing of God will rest on thee and thy noble wife for ever."

She raised his hand to her lips, and Gloucester, much affected, placed hers in her husband's, and wrung them convulsively together. "We shall meet again," was all he trusted his voice to utter, and departed.

The hours waned, each one finding no change in the position of those loving ones. The arm of Agnes twined around the neck of her beloved, her brow leaned against his bosom, her left hand clasped his right, and his left arm, though fettered, could yet fold that slender waist, could yet draw her closer to him, with an almost unconscious pressure; his lips repeatedly pressed that pale brow, which only moved from its position to lift up her eyes at his entreaty in his face, and he would look on those features, lovely still, despite their attenuation and deep sorrow, gaze at them with an expression that, spite of his words of consoling love, betrayed that the dream of earth yet lingered; he could not close his eyes on her without a thrill of agony, sharper than the pang of death. But the enthusiast and the patriot spoke not at that hour only of himself, or that dearer self, the only being he had loved. He spoke of his country, aye, and less deplored the chains which bound her then, than with that prophetic spirit sometimes granted to the departing, dilated on her future glory. He conjured Agnes, for his sake, to struggle on and live; to seek his brother and tell him that, save herself, Nigel's last thought,

last prayer was his ; that standing on the brink of eternity, the mists of the present had rolled away, he saw but the future—Scotland free, and Robert her beloved and mighty king.

“Bid him not mourn for Nigel,” he said ; “bid him not waver from his glorious purpose, because so many of his loved and noble friends must fall—their blood is their country’s ransom ; tell him, had I a hundred lives, I would have laid them down for him and for my country as gladly, as unhesitatingly as the one I now resign ; and tell him, dearest, how I loved him to the last, how the recollection of his last farewell, his fervent blessing lingered with me to the end, giving me strength to strive for him and die, as becomes his brother ; tell him I glory in my death—it has no shame, no terror, for it is for him and Scotland. Wilt thou remember all this, sweet love ? wilt thou speak to him these words ?”

“Trust me I will, all, all that thou hast said ; they are written here,” placing her hand on her heart, “here, and they will not leave me, even if all else fail.”

“And thou wilt say to him, mine own, that Nigel besought his love, his tenderness for thee,” he continued, losing the enthusiasm of the patriot in the tenderness of the husband ; “tell him I look to him in part to discharge the debt of love, of gratitude I owe to thee ; to guard thee, cherish thee as his own child. Alas ! alas ! I speak as if thou must reach him, and yet, beset with danger, misery as thou art, how may this be ?”

“Fear not for me ; it shall be, my husband. I will do thy bidding, I will seek my king,” she said, for when comfort failed for him, she sought to give it. “Hast forgotten Dermid’s words ? he would be near me when I needed him, and he will be, my beloved, I doubt him not.”

“Could I but think so, could I but know that he would be near to shield thee, oh, life’s last care would be at an end,” said Nigel, earnestly ; and then for some time that silence, more eloquent, more fraught with feeling in such an hour than the most impassioned words, fell on them both. When again he spoke, it was on a yet more holy theme ; the thoughts, the dreams of heaven, which from boyhood had been his, now found vent in words and tones, which thrilled to the inmost spirit of his listener, and lingered

there, when all other sense had fled. He had lived in an era of darkness. Revelation in its doctrines belonged to the priests alone; faith and obedience demanded by the voice of man alone, were all permitted to the laity, and spirits like Nigel's consequently formed a natural religion, in which they lived and breathed, hallowing the rites which they practised, giving scope and glory to their faith. He pictured the world, on whose threshold he now stood, pictured it, not with a bold unhallowed hand, but as the completion, the consummation of all those dim whisperings of joy and hope, and wisdom which had engrossed him below—the perfection of that beauty, that loveliness, in the material and immaterial, he had yearned for in vain on earth.

“And this world of incomparable unshadowed loveliness awaits me,” he said, the superstition of the age mingling for the moment with thoughts which seemed to mark him a century beyond his compeers; “purchased by that single moment of suffering called death. It is mine, my beloved, and shall be thine, and, oh, when we meet there, how trivial will seem the dark woes and boding cares of earth. I have told thee the vision of my vigil, Agnes, my beloved; again I have seen that blessed spirit, aye, and there was no more sadness on his pale brow, nought, nought of earth—spiritualized, etherealized. He hovered over my sleep, and with a smile beckoned me to the glorious world he inhabits; he seemed to call me, to await me, and then the shrouding clouds on which he lay closed thicker and thicker round him, till nought but his celestial features beamed on me. Agnes, dearest, best, think of me thus, as blessed eternally, unchangeably, as awaiting thee to share that blessedness, not as one lost to thee, beloved; and peace, aye, joy e'en yet shall smile for thee.”

“Nigel, Nigel, are there such things for the desolate, the lone?” murmured Agnes, raising her pale brow and looking despairingly in his face. Oh, I will think on thee, picture thee in thy thrice-glorified home, but it will be with all of mortal clinging to me still, and the wild yearnings to come to thee will banish all of peace. Speak not such words to thy poor weak Agnes, my beloved. I will struggle on to bear thy message to my sovereign; there lies my path when thou art gone, darkness envelopes it when that goal is

gained—I have no future now, save that which gives me back to thee.”

He could not answer, and then again there was silence, broken only by the low voice of prayer. They knelt together on the cold stones, he raised her cold hands with his in supplication; he prayed for mercy, pardon for himself, for comfort, strength for her; he prayed for his country and her king, her chained and sorrowing sons, and the soft, liquid star of morning, gleaming forth through heavy masses of murky clouds directly on them as they knelt, appeared an angel's answer. The dawn broke; bluer and bluer became the small and heavily-barred casement, clearer and clearer grew the damp walls of the dungeons, and morning, in its sunshine and gladness, laughed along the earth. Closer and closer did Agnes cling to that noble heart, but she spoke no word. “He tarries long—merciful heaven, grant he be not detained too late!” she heard her husband murmur, as to himself, as time waned and Gloucester came not, and she guessed his thoughts.

“I care not,” she answered, in a voice so hollow, he shuddered; “I will go with thee, even to the scaffold.”

But Gloucester, true to his promise, came at length; he was evidently anxious and disturbed, and a few hurried words told how the Earl of Berwick had detained him in idle converse, as if determined to prevent any private interview with the prisoner; even now the officers and priests were advancing to the dungeons, their steps already reverberated through the passages, and struck on the heart of Agnes as a bolt of ice. “I had much, much I wished to say, but even had I time, what boots it now? Nigel, worthy brother of him I so dearly loved, aye, even now would die to serve, fear not for the treasure thou leavest to my care; as there is a God above us, I will guard her as my sister! They come—farewell, thou noble heart, thou wilt leave many a foe to mourn thee!” The voice of the earl quivered with emotion. Nigel convulsively pressed his extended hand, and then he folded Agnes in his arms; he kissed her lips, her brow, her cheek, he parted those clustering curls to look again and yet again upon her face—pale, rigid as sculptured marble. She uttered no sound, she made no movement, but consciousness had not departed; the words of Gloucester on the previous night rung in her ears, demanding control, and

mechanically she let her arms unloose their convulsive grasp of Nigel, and permitted the earl gently to lead her to the door, but ere it opened, she turned again to look on Nigel. He stood, his arms clasped in that convulsive pressure of agony, his every feature working with the mighty effort at control with the last struggle of the mortal shell. With one faint yet thrilling cry she bounded back, she threw herself upon his swelling bosom, her lips met his in one last lingering kiss, and Gloucester tore her from his arms, they passed the threshold, another minute and the officers, and guard, and priest stood within the dungeon, and a harsh, rude voice bade the confessor haste to shrive the prisoner, for the hour of execution was at hand.

Bearing the slight form of the supposed page in his arms, Gloucester hastily threaded the passages leading from the dungeon to the postern by which he had intended to depart. His plan had been to rejoin his attendants and turn his back upon the city of Berwick ere the execution could take place; a plan which, from his detention, he already found was futile. The postern was closed and secured, and he was compelled to retrace his steps to a gate he had wished most particularly to avoid, knowing that it opened on a part of the court which, from its commanding a view of the scaffold, he justly feared would be crowded. He had paused but to speak one word of encouragement to Agnes, who, with a calmness, appalling from the rigidity of feature which accompanied it, now stood at his side; he bade her only hold by his cloak, and he hoped speedily to lead her to a place of safety. She heard him and made a sign of obedience. They passed the gate unquestioned, traversed an inner court, and made for the great entrance of the castle, there, unhappily, their progress was impeded. The scaffold, by order of Edward, had been erected on the summit of a small green ascent exactly opposite the prison of the Countess of Buchan, and extending in a direct line about half a quarter of a mile to the right of the castle gates, which had been flung wide open, that all the inhabitants of Berwick might witness the death of a traitor. Already the courts and every vacant space was crowded. A sea of human heads was alone visible, nay, the very buttresses and some pinnacles of the castle, which admitted any footing, although of the most precarious kind, had been appropriated. The youth, the extraordinary

beauty, and daring conduct of the prisoner had excited an unusual sensation in the town, and the desire to mark how such a spirit would meet his fate became irresistibly intense. Already it seemed as if there could be no space for more, yet numbers were still pouring in, not only most completely frustrating the intentions of the Earl of Gloucester, but forcing him, by the pressure of multitudes, with them towards the scaffold. In vain he struggled to free himself a passage; in vain he haughtily declared his rank and bade the presumptuous serfs give way. Some, indeed fell back, but uselessly, for the crowds behind pushed on those before, and there was no retreating, no possible means of escaping from that sight of horror which Gloucester had designed so completely to avoid. In the agony of disappointment, not a little mixed with terror as to its effects, he looked upon his companion. There was not a particle of change upon her countenance, lips, cheeks, brow, were indeed bloodless as marble, and as coldly still; her eyes were fascinated on the scaffold, and they moved not, quivered not. Even when the figure of an aged minstrel, in the garb of Scotland, suddenly stood between them and the dread object of their gaze, their expression changed not, she placed her hand in his, she spoke his name to her conductor, but it was as if a statue was suddenly endowed with voice and motion, so cold was the touch of that hand, so sepulchral was that voice; she motioned him aside with a gesture that compelled obedience, and again she looked upon the scaffold. The earl welcomed the old man gladly, for the tale of Agnes had already prepared him to receive him, and to rely on his care to convey her back to Scotland. Engrossed with his anxiety for her, and whenever that permitted him, speaking earnestly to the old man, Gloucester remained wholly unconscious of the close vicinity of one he was at that moment most desirous to avoid.

The Earl of Buchan, in the moment of ungovernable rage, had indeed flung himself on horseback and galloped from the castle the preceding night, intending to seek the king, and petition that the execution might be deferred till the torture had dragged the retreat of Agnes from Nigel's lips. The cool air of night, however, had had the effect of so far dissipating the fumes of passion, as to convince him that it would be well-nigh impossible to reach Carlisle, ob-

tain an interview with Edward at such an unseasonable hour, and return to Berwick in sufficient time for the execution of his diabolical scheme. He let the reins fall on his horse's neck, to ponder, and finally made up his mind it was better to let things take their course, and the sentence of the prisoner proceed without interruption; a determination hastened by the thought that should he die under the torture, all the ignominy and misery of a public execution would be eluded. The night was very dark and misty, the road in some parts passing through woods and morasses, and the earl, too much engrossed with his own dark thoughts to attend to his path, lost the track and wandered round and round, instead of going forward. This heightened not the amiability of his previous mood; but until dawn his efforts to retrace his steps or even discover where he was were useless. The morning, however, enabled him to reach Berwick, which he did just as the crowds were pouring into the castle yard, and the heavy toll of the bell announced the commencement of that fatal tragedy. He hastily dismounted and mingled with the populace, they bore him onward through another postern to that by which the other crowds had impelled Gloucester. Finding the space before them already occupied, these two human streams, of course, met and conjoined in the centre; and the two earls stood side by side. Gloucester, as we have said, wholly unconscious of Buchan's vicinity, and Buchan watching his anxious and sorrowful looks with the satisfaction of a fiend, revelling in his being thus hemmed in on all sides, and compelled to witness the execution of his friend. He watched him closely as he spoke with the minstrel, but tried in vain to distinguish what they said. He looked on the page too, and with some degree of wonder, though he believed it only mortal terror which made him look thus, natural in so young a child; but afterwards that look was only too fatally recalled.

Sleepless and sad had been that long night to another inmate of Berwick Castle, as well as to Nigel and his Agnes. It was not till the dawn had broken that the Countess of Buchan had sunk into a deep though troubled slumber, for it was not till then the confused sounds of the workmen employed in erecting the scaffold had ceased. She knew not for whom it was upraised, what noble friend and gallant

patriot would there be sacrificed. She would not, could not believe it was for Nigel; for when his name arose in her thoughts it was shudderingly repelled, and with him came the thought of her child—where, oh, where was she?—what would be her fate? The tolling of the bell awoke her from the brief trance of utter unconsciousness into which, from exhaustion, she had fallen. She glanced once beneath her. The crowds, the executioner at his post, the guard already round the scaffold, too truly told the hour was at hand, and though her heart turned sick with apprehension, and she felt as if to know the worst were preferable to the hour of suspense, she could not look again, and she would have sought the inner chamber, and endeavour to close both ears and eyes to all that was passing without, when the Earl of Berwick suddenly entered, and harshly commanded her to stir not from the cage.

"It is your sovereign's will, madam, that you witness the fate of the traitor so daring in your cause," he said, as with a stern grasp he forced her to the grating and retained his hold upon her arm; "that you may behold in his deserved fate the type of that which will at length befall the yet blacker traitor of his name. It is fitting so loyal a patriot as thyself should look on a patriot's fate, and profit thereby."

"Aye, learn how a patriot can die—how, when his life may no more benefit his country and his kin, he may serve them in his death," calmly and proudly she answered. "It is well, perchance when my turn cometh, I may thank thy master for the lesson now rudely forced upon me. The hour will come when the blood that he now so unjustly sheds shall shriek aloud for vengeance. On me let him work his will—I fear him not."

"Be silent, minion! I listen not to thy foul treason," said the earl, hoarse with suppressed passion at the little effect his sovereign's mandate produced, when he had hoped to have enforced it midst sobs and tears; and she was silent, for her eye had caught one face amidst the crowd that fascinated its gaze, and sent back the blood, which had seemed to stagnate when the idea that it was indeed Nigel now about to suffer had been thus rudely thrust upon her—sent it with such sudden revulsion through its varied channels, that it was only with a desperate struggle she retained her outward calmness, and then she

stood, to the eye of Berwick, proud, dignified, collected, seemingly so cold, that he doubted whether aught of feeling could remain, or marvelled if the mandate of Edward had indeed power to inflict aught of pain. But within—oh, the veriest tyrant must have shuddered, could he have known the torture there; she saw, she recognised her child; she read nought but madness in that chiselled gaze; she saw at a glance there was no escaping from beholding, to the dreadful end, the fate of her beloved; before, behind, on every side, the crowds pressed round, yet from the slightly elevated position of the scaffold, failing to conceal it from her gaze. The Earl of Gloucester she perceived close at her side, as if protecting her; but if indeed she was under his care, how came she on such a spot, at such a time?—did he know her sex, or only looked on her as a favoured page of Nigel's, and as such protected? Yet would not the anguish of that hour betray her not alone to him, but to that dark and cruel man whom she also marked beside her, and who, did he once know her, would demand the right of a father, to give her to his care? and oh, how would that right be exercised! would the murderer of his son, his heir, have pity on a daughter? But it would be a vain effort to picture the deep anguish of that mother's heart, as in that dread moment she looked upon her child, knowing, feeling *her* might of grief, as if it had been her own; well-nigh suffocated with the wild yearning to fold her to her maternal bosom, to bid her weep there, to seek to comfort, to soothe, by mingling her tears with hers, to protect, to hide her misery from all save her mother's eye—to feel this till every pulse throbbed as to threaten her with death, and yet to breathe no word, to give no sign, that such things were, lest she should endanger that precious one still more. She dared not breathe one question of the many crowding on her heart, she could but gaze and feel. She had thought, when they told her that her boy was dead, that she had caused his death, there was little more of misery fate could weave, but at that moment even Alan was forgotten. It was her own wretchedness she had had then to bear, for he was at rest; but now it was the anguish of that dearer self, her sole remaining child—and oh, a mother's heart can better bear its individual woes than those which crush a daughter to the earth.

A sudden rush amidst the crowd, where a movement could take place, the heavy roll of muffled drums, and the yet deeper, more wailing toll of the funeral bell, announced that the prisoner had left the dungeon, and irresistibly the gaze of the countess turned from her child to seek him; perchance it was well, for the preservation of her composure, that the intervening crowd prevented her beholding him till he stood upon the scaffold, for hardly could she have borne unmoved the sight of that noble and gallant form—beloved alike as the friend of her son, the betrothed of her daughter, the brother of her king—degraded of all insignia of rank, chained to the hurdle, and dragged as the commonest, the vilest criminal, exposed to the mocking gaze of thousands, to the place of execution. She saw him not thus, and therefore she knew not wherefore the features of Agnes had become yet more rigid, bore yet more the semblance of chiselled marble. He stood at length upon the scaffold, as calmly majestic in his bearing as if he had borne no insult, suffered no indignity. His beautiful hair had been arranged with care on either side his face, and still fell in its long, rich curls about his throat, and so beautiful, so holy was the expression of his perfect features that the assembled crowds hushed their very breath in admiration and in awe; it seemed as if the heaven on whose threshold he stood had already fixed its impress on his brow. Every eye was upon him, and all perceived that holy calmness was for one brief minute disturbed; but none, save three of those who marked it, knew or even guessed the cause. The countess had watched his glance, as at first composedly it had wandered over the multitude beneath and around him, and she saw it rest on that one face, which in its sculptured misery stood alone amidst thousands, and she alone perceived the start of agony that sight occasioned, but speedily even that emotion passed; he looked from that loved face up to the heaven on which his hopes were fixed, in whose care for her he trusted, and that look was prayer. She saw him as he knelt in prayer, undisturbed by the clang of instruments still kept up around him; she saw him rise, and then a deadly sickness crept over her every limb, a thick mist obscured her sight, sense seemed on the point of deserting her, when it was recalled by a sound of horror, a shriek so wild, so long, so thrilling, the rudest spirit midst

those multitudes shrunk back appalled, and crossed themselves in terror; on one ear it fell with a sense of agony almost equal to that from whence it came—the mother recognised the voice, and feeling, sight, hearing as by an electric spell returned. She looked forth again, and though her eye caught the noble form of Nigel Bruce yet quivering in the air, she shrunk not, she sickened not, for its gaze sought her child; she had disappeared from the place she had occupied. She saw the Earl of Gloucester making a rapid way through the dispersing crowds, a sudden gust blew aside his wrapping-cloak, the face of her child was exposed to her view, there was a look of death upon her brow, and if the Earl of Berwick had lingered to note whether indeed this scene of horror would pass unnoticed, unfelt by his prisoner, he was gratified at length, for Isabella of Buchan lay senseless on her prison floor.

CHAPTER XXVI.

“AND she is in safety, Gilbert?” inquired the Princess Joan, the evening of the day following the execution, lifting her eyes, swimming in tears, to her husband’s face. They were sitting alone in their private apartments, secured from all intruders, by a page stationed in the ante-room; and the earl had been relating some important particulars of the preceding day.

“I trust in heaven she is, and some miles ere now on her road to Scotland,” was his answer. “I fear for nothing save for the beautiful mind that fragile shell contains; alas! my Joan, I fear me that has gone for ever.”

“Better, oh, better, then, that fainting fit had indeed been death,” she said, “that the thread of life had snapped than twisted thus in madness. Yet thou sayest her purpose seemed firm, her intellect clear, in her intense desire to reach Scotland. Would this be, thinkest thou, were they disordered?”

“I think yes; for hadst thou seen, as I, the expression of countenance, the unearthly calmness with which this

desire. was enforced, the constant though unconscious repetition of words as these, 'to the king, to the king, my path lies there, he bade me seek him; perchance he will be there to meet me,' thou too wouldst feel that, when that goal is gained, her husband's message given, sense must fail or life itself depart. But once for a few brief minutes I saw that calmness partly fail, and I indulged in one faint hope she would be relieved by tears. She saw old Dermid gaze on her and weep; she clung to his neck, her features worked convulsively, and her voice was choked and broken, as she said, 'we must not tarry, Dermid, we must not wait to weep and moan; I must seek King Robert while I can. There is a fire on my brain and heart, which will soon scorch up all memory but one; I must not wait till it has reached *his* words, and burned them up too—oh, let us on at once;' but the old man's kindly words had not the effect I hoped, she only shook her head, and then, as if the horrible recollection of the past flashed back, a convulsive shuddering passed through her frame, and when she raised her face from her hands its marble rigidity had returned."

"Alas! alas! poor sufferer," exclaimed the princess, in heartfelt sorrow, "I fear indeed, if such things be, there is little hope of reason. I would thou hadst conveyed her here, perchance the soothing and sympathy of one of her own sex had averted this evil."

"I doubt, my kind Joan," replied her husband; "thy words had such beneficial power before, because hope had still possession of her breast, she hoped to the very last, aye even when she so madly went with thee to Edward, now that is over; hope is crushed, when despair has risen. Thou couldst not have soothed; it would have been but wringing thy too kind heart, and exposing her to other and heightened evils." The princess looked up inquiringly. "Knowest thou not Buchan hath discovered that his daughter remained with Nigel Bruce, as his engaged bride, at Kildrummie, and is even now seeking her retreat, vowing she shall repent with tears of blood her connection with a Bruce?"

"I did not indeed; how came this?"

"How I know not, save that it was reported Buchan had left the court, on a mission to the convent where the Countess of Carrick and her attendants are immured, and

in all probability learnt this important fact from them. I only know that at the instant I entered the prisoner's dungeon, Buchan was demanding, at the sword's point, the place of her retreat, incited to the deadliest fury at Nigel's daring avowal that Agnes was his wife."

"Merciful heaven! and Agnes, what did she?"

"I know not, for I dared not, absolutely dared not look upon her face. Her husband's self-control saved her, for he stood and answered as calmly and collectedly as if indeed she were in the safety he declared; her father brushed by, nay, well-nigh stumbled over her, as he furiously quitted the dungeon, glared full at her, but knew her not. But I dared not again bring her here, it was in too close vicinity with the king and her cruel father, for her present state of mind must have betrayed every disguise."

"And thinkest thou he could have the heart to injure her, separated as she is by death from the husband of her love?"

"Aye, persecute her as he hath his wife and son. Joan, I would rather lose my own right hand than that unhappy girl should fall into her father's power. Confinement, indeed, though it would add but little real misery to her present lot, yet I feel that with her present wild yearnings to rejoin the Bruce, to fulfil to the very utmost her husband's will, it would increase tenfold the darkness round her; the very dread of her father would unhinge the last remaining link of intellect."

Joan shuddered. "God in mercy forefend such ill!" she said, fervently. "I would I could have seen her once again, for she has strangely twined herself about my heart, but thou hast judged wisely, my Gilbert, her safety is too precious to be thus idly risked; and this old man, canst thou so trust him—will he guide her tenderly and well?"

"Aye, I would stake my life upon his truth; he is the seer and minstrel of the house of Bruce, and that would be all-sufficient to guarantee his unwavering fidelity and skill. He has wandered on foot from Scotland, to look on his beloved master once again; to watch over, as a guardian spirit, the fate of that master's devoted wife, and he will do this, I doubt not, and discover Carrick's place of retreat, were it at the utmost boundaries of the earth. I only dread pursuit."

"Pursuit ! and by whom ?"

"By her father. Men said he was close beside me during that horrible hour, though I saw him not ; if he observed her, traced to her lips that maddened shriek, it would excite his curiosity quite sufficiently for him to trace my steps, and discovery were then inevitable."

"But did he do this—hast seen him since ?"

"No, he has avoided me ; but still, for her sake, I fear him. I know not how or when, but there are boding whispers within me that all will not be well. Now I would have news from thee. Is Hereford released ?"

"Yes ; coupled with the condition that he enters not my father's presence until Easter. He is deeply and justly hurt ; but more grieved at the change in his sovereign than angered at the treatment of himself."

"No marvel ; for if ever there were a perfect son of chivalry, one more feelingly alive to its smallest point of honour, it is Humphrey Bohun."

So spoke Gilbert de Clare, Earl of Gloucester, unconscious that he himself had equal right to a character so exalted ; that both Scottish and English historians would emulate each other in handing his name down to posterity, surrounded by that lucid halo of real worth, on which the eye turns again and again to rest for relief from the darker minds and ruder hearts which formed the multitude of the age in which he lived. The duties of friendship were performed in his preservation of the person, and constant and bold defence of the character of the Bruce ; the duties of a subject, in dying on the battle-field in service for his king.

The boding prognostics of the Earl of Gloucester were verified ere that day closed. While still in earnest converse with his countess, a messenger came from the king, demanding their instant presence in his closet. The summons was so unusual, that in itself it was alarming, nor did the sight of the Earl of Buchan in close conference with the monarch, decrease their fears. As soon as a cessation of his pains permitted the exertion, Buchan had been sent for by the king ; the issue of his inquiries after his daughter demanded, and all narrated ; his interview with Sir Nigel dwelt upon with all the rancour of hate. Edward had listened without making any observation ; a twinkle of his still

bright eye, an expression about the lips alone betraying that he not only heard but was forming his own conclusions from the tale.

"And you have no clue, no thought of her retreat?" he asked, at length abruptly, when the earl ceased.

"Not the faintest, your grace. Had not that interfering Gloucester come between me and my foe, I had forced it from him at the sharp sword's point."

"Gloucester—humph!" muttered the king. "Yet an so bloody was thy purpose, my good lord, his interference did thee no ill. How was the earl accompanied—was he alone?"

"If I remember rightly, alone, your grace. No, by my faith, there was a page with him!"

"A page—ha! and what manner of man was he?"

"Man! your highness, say rather a puny stripling, with far more of the woman about him than the man."

"Ha!" again uttered the king; "looked he so weakly—did thy fury permit such keen remark?"

"Not at that time, your highness; but he was, with Gloucester, compelled to witness the execution of this black traitor; and he looked white, statue-like, and uttered a shriek, forsooth, likely to scare back the villain's soul even as it took flight. Gloucester cared for the dainty brat, as if he had been a son of your highness, not a page in his household, for he lifted him up in his arms, and bore him out of the crowd."

"Humph!" said Edward again, in a tone likely to have excited curiosity in any mind less obtuse on such matters than that of the Scottish earl. "And thou sayest," he added, after some few minutes' pause, "this daring traitor, so lately a man, would tell thee no more than that thy daughter was his wife, and in safety—out of thy reach?"

Buchan answered in the affirmative.

"And thou hast not the most distant idea where he hath concealed her?"

"None your highness."

"Then, I will tell thee, sir earl; and if thou dost not feel inclined to dash out thine own brains with vexation at letting thy prey so slip out of thy grasp, thou art not the man I took thee for," and Edward fixed his eyes on his startled companion with a glance at once keen and malicious.

"The white and statue-looking page, with more of woman about him than the man, was the *wife* of this rank villain, Sir Nigel Bruce, and thy daughter, my Lord of Buchan. The Earl of Gloucester may, perchance, tell thee more."

The earl started from his seat with an oath, which the presence of majesty itself could not restrain. The dullness of his brain was dissolved as by a flash of lightning; the ghastly appearance, the maddening shriek, the death-like faint, all of which he had witnessed in Gloucester's supposed page, nay, the very disturbed and anxious look of the earl himself, gave truth and life to Edward's words, and he struck his clenched fist against his brow, and strode up and down the royal closet, in a condition as frantically disturbed as the monarch could possibly have desired; and then, hastily and almost incoherently, besought the king's aid in sifting the matter to the very bottom, and obtaining repossession of his daughter, entreating leave of absence to seek out Gloucester and tax him with the fact.

Edward, whose fury against the house of Bruce—whether man, woman, or child, noble, or serf belonging to them—had been somewhat soothed by the ignominious execution of Nigel, had felt almost as much amused as angered at the earl's tale, and enjoyed the idea of a man, whom in his inmost heart he most thoroughly despised, having been so completely outwitted, and for the time so foiled. The feud between the Comyn and the Bruce was nothing to him, except where it forwarded his own interests. He had incited Buchan to inquire about his daughter, simply because the occupation would remove that earl out of his way for a short time, and perhaps, if the rumour of her engagement with one of the brothers of the Bruce were true, set another engine at work to discover the place of their concealment. The moment Buchan informed him it was to Nigel she had been engaged, with Nigel last seen, his acute penetration recalled the page who had accompanied the princess when she supplicated mercy, and had he heard no more, would have pointed there for the solution of the mystery. Incensed he was and deeply, at the fraud practised upon him at the Earl and Countess of Gloucester daring to harbour, nay, protect and conceal the wife of a traitor; but his anger was subdued in part by the belief that now it was

almost impossible she could escape the wardance of her father, and *his* vengeance would be more than sufficient to satisfy him ; nay, when he recalled the face and the voice, it was so like madness and death, and he was, moreover, so convinced that now her husband was dead she could do him no manner of harm, that he inwardly and almost unconsciously hoped she might eventually escape her father's power, although he composedly promised the earl to exercise his authority, and give him the royal warrant for the search and committal of her person wherever she might be. Anger, that Gloucester and his wife should so have dared his sovereign power, was now the prevailing feeling, and therefore was it he commanded their presence, determined to question them himself, rather than through the still enraged Buchan.

Calmly and collectedly the noble pair received alike the displeasure of their sovereign and the ill-concealed fury of Buchan. They neither denied the charge against them nor equivocated in their motives for their conduct, alarmed they were indeed for the unhappy Agnes ; but as denial and concealment were now alike impossible, and could avail her nothing, they boldly, nay, proudly acknowledged that which they had done, and openly rejoiced it had been theirs to give one gleam of comfort to the dying Nigel, by extending protection to his wife.

"And are ye not traitors—bold, presuming traitors—deserving the chastisement of such, bearding me thus in my very palace?" wrathfully exclaimed Edward. "Know ye not both are liable to the charge of treason, aye, treason—and fear ye to brave us thus?"

"My liege, we are no traitors, amenable to no such charge," calmly answered Gloucester ; "far, far more truly, faithfully, devotedly your grace's subjects than many of those who had shrunk from an act as this. That in so doing we were likely to incur your royal displeasure, we acknowledge with deep regret and sorrow, and I take it no shame thus on my knees to beseech your highness's indulgence for the fault ; but if you deem it worthy of chastisement, we are ready to submit to it, denying, however, all graver charge than that of failing in proper deference to your grace."

"All other charge ! By St. Edward, is not that enough?"

answered the king, but in a mollified tone. "And thou, minion, thou whom we deemed the very paragon of integrity and honour, hast thou aught to say? Did not thy lips frame falsehood, and thy bold looks confirm it?"

"My father, my noble father, pardon me that in this I erred," answered Joan, kneeling by his side, and, despite his efforts to prevent it, clasping his hand and covering it with kisses; "yet I spoke no falsehood, uttered naught which was not truth. She *was* ill and weakly; she *was* well-nigh maddened from scenes and sounds of blood. I had besought her not to attend me, but a wife's agony could not be restrained, and if we had refused her the protection she so wildly craved, had discovered her person to your highness, would it have availed thee aught? a being, young, scarce past her childhood—miserable, maddened well-nigh to death, her life wrapt up in her husband's, which was forfeited to thee."

"The wife of a traitor, the offspring of a traitress, connected on every side with treason, and canst ask if her detention would have availed us aught? Joan, Joan, thy defence is but a weak one," answered the king, sternly, but he called her "Joan," and that simple word thrilled to her heart the voice of former years, and her father felt a sudden gush of tears fall on the hand he had not withdrawn, and vainly he struggled against the softening feelings those tears had wrought. It was strange that, angered as he really was, the better feelings of Edward should in such a moment have so completely gained the ascendancy. Perhaps he was not proof against the contrast before him, presented in the persons of Buchan and Gloucester; the base villainy of the one, the exalted nobility of the other, alike shone forth the clearer from their unusually close contact. In general, Edward was wont to deem these softening emotions foolish weaknesses, which he would banish by shunning the society of all those who could call them forth. Their candid acknowledgement of having deserved his displeasure, and submission to his will, however, so soothed his self-love, his fondness for absolute power, that he premitted them to have vent but little restraint. Agnes might have been the wife of a traitor, but he was out of Edward's way; the daughter of a traitress, but she was equally powerless; linked with treason, but too much

crushed by her own misery to be sensible of aught else. Surely she was too insignificant for him to persevere in wrath, and alienate by unmerited severity yet more the hearts which at such moments he felt he valued, despite his every effort to the contrary.

So powerfully was he worked upon, that had it not been for the ill-restrained fury of Buchan, it was possible the subject would have been in the end peaceably dismissed ; but on that earl's reminding him of his royal word, the king commanded Gloucester to deliver up his charge to her rightful guardian, and all the past should be forgiven. The earl quietly and respectfully replied he could not, for he knew not where she was. Wrath gathered on Edward's brow, and Buchan laid his hand on his sword ; but neither the royal commands nor Buchan's muttered threats and oaths of vengeance could elicit from Gloucester more than that she had set off to return to Scotland with an aged man, not three hours after the execution had taken place. He had purposely avoided all inquiries as to their intended route, and therefore not any cross-questioning on the part of the king caused him to waver in the smallest point from his original tale, or afforded any evidence that he knew more than he said.

"Get thee to Sir Edward Cunningham, my Lord of Buchan, and bid him draw up a warrant for the detention and committal of these two persons wherever they may be," the king said, "and away with thee, and a trusty troop, with all speed to Berwick. Make inquiries of all who at that particular hour passed the gates, and be assured thou wilt find some clue. Take men enough to scour the country in all directions ; provide them with an exact description of the prisoners they seek, and tarry not, and thou wilt yet gain thy prize ; living or dead, we resign all our right over her person to thee, and give thee power, as her father, to do with her what may please thee best. Away with thee, my lord, and heaven speed thee !"

"My liege and father, oh, why hast thou done this ?" exclaimed the princess, imploringly, as, with a low obeisance to the king and a gesture of triumph at the Earl of Gloucester, Buchan departed. "Hath she not borne misery enough !"

"Nay, we do but our duty to our subjects in aiding

fathers to repress rebellious children," replied the king. "Of a truth, fair dame of Gloucester, thy principles of filial duty seem somewhat as loose and light as those which counselled abetting, protecting, and concealing the partner of a traitor. Wouldst have us refuse Buchan's most fatherly desire? Surely thou wouldst not part him from his child?"

"For ever and for ever!" exclaimed the princess, fervently. "Great God in heaven, that such a being should call that monster father, and owe him the duty of a child! But, oh, thou dost but jest, my father; in mercy recall that warrant—expose her not to wretchedness as this!"

"Peace," replied the king, sternly. "As thou valuest thine own and thy husband's liberty and life, breathe not another syllable, speak not another word for her, or double misery shall be her portion. We have shown enough of mercy in demanding no farther punishment for that which ye have done, than that for ten days ye remain prisoners in your own apartments. Answer not; we will have no more of this."

The Earl of Buchan, meanwhile, had made no delay in gaining the necessary aids to his plan. Ere two hours passed, he was on his road to Berwick, backed with a stout body of his own retainers, and bearing a commission to the Earl of Berwick to provide him with as many more as he desired. He went first to the hostelry near the outskirts of the town, where he remembered Gloucester had borne the supposed page. There he obtained much desirable information, an exact description of the dress, features, and appearance of both the page and his companion; of the former indeed he recollected all-sufficient, even had the description been less exact. The old minstrel had attracted the attention of many within the hostel, and consequently enabled Buchan to obtain information from various sources, all of which agreed so well that he felt sure of success.

Backed by the warrant of Edward, he went to the civil authorities of the town, obtained four or five technically drawn-up descriptions of the prisoners, and intrusted them to the different officers, who, with bands of fifty men, he commanded to search every nook and corner of the country round Berwick, in various directions. He himself discovering they had passed through the Scotch gate and ap-



a favourable opportunity to return to Scotland, and once more upraise his standard. This news had been most religiously and strictly preserved a secret amid the few faithful adherents of the Bruce, who perhaps spoke yet more as they hoped than as a fact well founded.

For some days their way had been more fatiguing than dangerous, for though the country was overrun with English, a minstrel and a page were objects far too insignificant, in the present state of excitement, to meet with either detention or notice. Not a week had passed, however, before rumours of Buchan's parties reached the old man's ears, and filled him with anxiety and dread. The feverish restlessness of Agnes to advance yet quicker on their way, precluded all idea of halting, save in woods and caverns, till the danger had passed. Without informing her of all he had heard, and the danger he apprehended, he endeavoured to avoid all towns and villages; but the heavy rains which had set in rendered their path through the country yet more precarious and uncertain, and often compelled him most unwillingly to seek other and better shelter. At Strathaven he became conscious that their dress and appearance were strictly scrutinized, and some remarks that he distinguished convinced him that Buchan had either passed through that town, or was lingering in its neighbourhood still. Turning sick with apprehension, the old man hastily retraced his steps to the hostel, where he had left Agnes, and found her, for the first time since their departure, sunk into a kind of sleep or stupor from exhaustion, from which he could not bear to arouse her. Watching her for some little time in silence, his attention was attracted by whispering voices, only separated from him by a thin partition. They recounted and compared one by one the dress and peculiar characteristics of himself and his companion, seeming to compare it with a written list. Then followed an argument as to whether it would not be better to arrest their progress at once, or send on to the Earl of Buchan, who was at a castle only five miles distant. How it was determined Dermid knew not, for the voices faded in the distance; but he had heard enough, and it seemed indeed as if detention and restraint were at length at hand. What to do he knew not. Night had now some hours advanced, and to attempt leaving the hostel at such

an unseasonable hour would be of itself sufficient to confirm suspicion. All seemed at rest within the establishment; there was no sound to announce that a messenger had been dispatched to the earl, and he determined to await as calmly as might be the dawn.

The first streak of light, however, was scarce visible in the east before, openly and loudly, so as to elude all appearance of flight, he declared his intention of pursuing his journey, as the weather had already detained them too long. He called on the hostess to receive her reckoning, commanded the mules to be saddled, all of which was done, to his surprise, without comment or question, and they departed unrestrained; the old man too much overjoyed at this unexpected escape to note that they were followed by two Englishmen, the one on horseback, the other on foot. Anxiety indeed had still possession of him, for he could not reconcile the words he had overheard with their quiet departure; but as the day passed and they plunged thicker and thicker in the woods of Carrick, and there was no sign of pursuit, or even of a human form, he hailed with joy a solitary house, and believed the danger passed.

The inmates received them with the utmost hospitality, the order for their detention had evidently not reached them, and Dermid determined on waiting quietly there till the exhausted strength of his companion should be recruited, and permit them to proceed. An hour and more passed in cheerful converse with the aged couple who owned the house, and who, with the exception of one or two servants, were its sole inhabitants. The tales of the minstrel were called for and received with a glee which seemed to make all his listeners feel young again. Agnes alone sate apart; her delicate frame and evident exhaustion concealing deeper sufferings from her hosts, who vied with each other in seeking to alleviate her fatigue and give bodily comfort, if they could offer no other consolation. Leaning back in a large settle in the chimney corner, she had seemed unconscious of the cheerful sociability around her, when suddenly she arose, and advancing to Dermid, laid a trembling hand on his arm. He looked up surprised.

"Hist!" she murmured, throwing back the hair from her damp brow. "Hear ye no sound?"

All listened for a time in vain.

"Again," she said; "'tis nearer, more distinct. Who comes with a troop of soldiers here?"

It was indeed the heavy trampling of many horse, at first so distant as scarcely to be distinguished, save by ears anxious and startled as old Dermid's; but nearer and nearer they came, till even the inmates of the house all huddled together in alarm. Agnes remained standing, her hand on Dermid's arm, her head thrown back, her features bearing an expression scarce to be defined. The horses' hoofs, mingled with the clang of armour, rang sharp and clear on the stones of the courtyard. They halted: the pommel of a sword was struck against the oaken door, and a night's lodging courteously demanded. The terror of the owners of the house subsided, for the voice they heard was Scotch.

The door was thrown open, the request granted, with the same hospitality as had been extended to the minstrel and the page. On the instant there was a confused sound of warriors dismounting, of horses eager for stabling and forage; and one tall and stately figure, clad from head to foot in mail, entered the house, and removing his helmet, addressed some words of courteous greeting and acknowledgement to its inmates. A loud exclamation burst from the minstrel's lips; but Agnes uttered no sound, she made one bound forward, and dropped senseless at the warrior's feet.

CHAPTER XXVII.

It was on a cool evening, near the end of September, 1311, that a troop, consisting of about thirty horse, and as many on foot, were leisurely traversing the mountain passes between the counties of Dumfries and Lanark. Their arms were well burnished; their buff coats and half-armour in good trim; their banner waved proudly from its staff, as bright and gay as if it had not even neared a scene of strife; and there was an air of hilarity and gallantry about them that argued well for success, if about to commence an expedition, or if returning, told with equal emphasis they had been successful. That the latter was the case was

speedily evident, from the gay converse passing between them; their allusions to some late gallant achievement of their patriot sovereign; their joyous comparisons between good King Robert and his weak opponent, Edward II. of England, marvelling how so wavering and indolent a son could have sprung from so brave and determined a sire; for Scotsmen, as they were, they were now FREE, and could thus afford to allow the "hammer" of their country some knightly qualities, despite the stern and cruel tyranny which to them had ever marked his conduct. They spoke in laughing scorn of the second Edward's efforts to lay his father's yoke anew upon their necks; they said a just heaven had interfered and urged him to waste the decisive moment of action in indolence and folly, in the flatteries of his favourite, to the utter exclusion of those wiser lords, whose counsels, if followed on the instant, might have shaken even the wise and patriot Bruce. Yet they were so devoted to their sovereign, they idolized him alike as a warrior and a man too deeply, to allow that to the weak and vacillating conduct of Edward they owed the preservation of their country. It was easy to perceive, by the springy step, the flashing eye, the ringing tone with which that magic name, the Bruce, was spoken, how deeply it was written on the heart; the joy it was to recall his deeds and feel it was through him that they were free! Their converse easily betrayed them to be one of those well-ordered though straggling parties into which King Robert's invading armies generally dispersed at his command, when returning to their own fastnesses, after a successful expedition to the English border.

The laugh and jest resounded, as we have said, amongst both officers and men; but their leader, who was riding about a stone's throw ahead, gave no evidence of sharing their mirth. He was clad from head to foot in chain armour, of a hue so dark as to be mistaken for black, and from his wearing a surcoat of the same colour, unenlivened by any device, gave him altogether a somewhat sombre appearance, although it could not detract in the smallest degree from the peculiar gracefulness and easy dignity of his form, which was remarkable both on horseback and on foot. He was evidently very tall, and by his firm seat in the saddle, had been early accustomed to eques-

trian exercises ; but his limbs were slight almost to delicacy, and though completely ensheathed in mail, there was an appearance of extreme youth about him that perhaps rendered the absence of all gaiety the more striking. Yet on the battle-field he gave no evidence of inexperience as a warrior, no sign that he was merely a scholar in the art of war ; there only did men believe he must be older than he seemed ; there only his wonted depression gave place to an energy, a fire, second to none amongst the Scottish patriots, not even to the Bruce himself ; then only was the naturally melancholy music of his voice lost in accents of thrilling power, of imperative command, and the oldest warriors followed him as if under the influence of some spell. But of his appearance on the field we must elsewhere speak. He now led his men through the mountain defiles mechanically, as if buried in meditation, and that meditation not of the most pleasing nature. His vizier was closed, but short clustering curls, of a raven blackness, escaped beneath the helmet, and almost concealed the white linen and finely embroidered collar, which lay over his gorget, and was secured in front by a ruby clasp ; a thick plume of black feathers floated from his helmet, rivalling in colour the mane of his gallant charger, which pawed the ground, and held his head aloft as if proud of the charge he bore. A shield was slung round the warrior's neck, and its device and motto seemed in melancholy accordance with the rest of his attire. On a field argent lay the branch of a tree proper, blasted and jagged, with the words, "*Ni nom ni paren, je suis seul*," rudely engraved in Norman French beneath ; his helmet bore no crest, nor did his war-cry on the field, "Amiot for the Bruce and freedom," offer any clue to the curious, as to his history, for that there was some history attached to him all chose to believe, though the age was too full of excitement to allow much of wonderment or curiosity to be expended upon him. His golden spurs gave sufficient evidence that he was a knight ; his prowess on the field proclaimed whoever had given him that honour had not bestowed it on the undeserving. His deeds of daring, unequalled even in that age, obtained him favour in the eyes of every soldier ; and if there were some in the court and camp of Bruce who were not quite satisfied, and loved not the mystery which surrounded him, it mattered

not, Sir Amiot of the Branch, or the Lonely Chevalier, as he was generally called, went on his way unquestioned.

"Said not Sir Edward Bruce he would meet us hereabouts at set of sun?" were the first words spoken by the knight, as, on issuing from the mountains, they found themselves on a broad plain to the east of Lanark, bearing sad tokens of a devastating war, in the ruined and blackened huts which were the only vestiges of human habitations near. The answer was in the affirmative; and the knight, after glancing in the direction of the sun, which wanted about an hour to its setting, commanded a halt, and desired that, while waiting the arrival of their comrades, they should take their evening meal.

On the instant the joyous sounds of dismounting, leading horses to picquet, unclasping helmets, throwing aside the more easily displaced portions of their armour, shields, and spears, took the place of the steady tramp and well-ordered march. Flinging themselves in various attitudes on the green sward, provender was speedily laid before them, and rare wines and other choice liquors, fruits of their late campaign, passed gaily round. An esquire had, at the knight's sign, assisted him to remove his helmet, shield, and gauntlets, but though this removal displayed a beautifully formed head, thickly covered with dark hair, his features were still concealed by a species of black mask, the mouth, chin, and eyes being alone visible, and therefore his identity was effectually hidden. The mouth and chin were both small and delicately formed; the slight appearance of beard and moustache seeming to denote his age as some one-and-twenty years. His eyes, glancing through the opening in the mask, were large and very dark, often flashing brightly, when his outward bearing was so calm and quiet as to afford little evidence of emotion. Some there were, indeed, who believed the eye the truer index of the man than aught else about him, and to fancy there was far more in that sad and lonely knight than was revealed.

It was evident, however, that to the men now with him his remaining so closely masked was no subject of surprise, that they regarded it as an ordinary thing, which in consequence had lost its strangeness. They were eager and respectful in their manner towards him, offering to raise him a seat of turf at some little distance from their noisy com-

rades; but acknowledging their attention with kindness and courtesy, he refused it, and rousing himself with some difficulty from his desponding thoughts, threw himself on the sword beside his men, and joined in their mirth and jest.

"Hast thou nought to tell to while away this tedious hour, good Murdoch?" he asked, after a while, addressing a grey-headed veteran.

"Aye, aye, a tale, a tale; thou hast seen more of the Bruce than all of us together," repeated many eager voices, "and knowest yet more of his deeds than we do; a tale an thou wilt, but of no other hero than the Bruce."

"The Bruce!" echoed the veteran; "see ye not his deeds yourselves, need ye more of them?" but there was a sly twinkle in his eye that betrayed his love to speak was as great as his comrades to hear of him. "Have ye not heard, aye, and many of you seen his adventures and escapes in Carrick, hunted even as he was by bloodhounds; his guarding that mountain pass, one man against sixty, aye, absolutely alone against the Galwegian host of men and bloodhounds; Glen Fruin, Loudun Hill, Aberdeen; the harrying of Buchan; charging the treacherous foe, when they had to bear him from his litter to his horse, aye, and support him there; springing up from his couch of pain, and suffering, and depression, agonizing to witness, to hurl vengeance on the fell traitors; aye, and he did it, and brought back health to his own heart and frame; and Forfar, Lorn, Dunstaffnage—know ye not all these things? Nay, have ye not seen, shared in them all—what would ye more?"

"The harrying of Buchan, tell us of that," loudly exclaimed many voices; while some others shouted, "the landing of the Bruce—tell us of his landing, and the spirit fire at Turnberry Head; the strange woman that addressed him."

"Now which am I to tell, good my masters?" laughingly answered the old man, when the tumult in a degree subsided. "A part of one, and part of the other, and leave ye to work out the rest yourselves; truly, a pleasant occupation. Say, shall it be thus? yet stay, what says Sir Amiot?"

"As you will, my friends," answered the knight, cheerily; "but decide quickly, or we shall hear neither. I am for the

tale of Buchan," there was a peculiarly thrilling emphasis in his tone as he pronounced the word, "for I was not in Scotland at the time, and have heard but disjointed rumours of the expedition."

The veteran looked round on his eager comrades with an air of satisfaction, then clearing his voice, and drawing more to the centre of the group, "Your worship knows," he began, addressing Sir Amiot, who, stretched at full length on the sward, had fixed his eyes upon him, though their eagle glance was partly shaded by his hand, "that our good King Robert the Bruce, determined on the reduction of the north of his kingdom, advanced thereto in the spring of 1308, accompanied by his brother, Lord Edward, that right noble gentleman the Earl of Lennox, Sir Gilbert Hay, Sir Robert Boyd, and others, with a goodly show of men and arms, for his successes at Glen Fruin and Loudun Hill had brought him a vast accession of loyal subjects. And they were needed, your worship, of a truth, for the traitorous Comyns had almost entire possession of the castles and forts of the north, and thence were wont to pour down their ravaging hordes upon the true Scotsmen, and menace the king, till he scarce knew which side to turn to first. Your worship coming, I have heard, from the low country, can scarcely know all the haunts and lurking places for treason the highlands of our country present; how hordes of traitors may be trained and armed in these remote districts, without the smallest suspicion being attached to them till it is well-nigh too late, and the mischief is done. Well, to drive out these black villains, to free his kingdom not alone from the yoke of an English Edward, but a Scottish Comyn, good King Robert was resolved—and even as he resolved he did. Inverness, the citadel of treason and disloyalty, fell before him; her defences, and walls, and turrets, and towers, all dismantled and levelled, so as to prevent all further harbourage of treason; her garrison marched out, the ringleaders sent into secure quarters, and all who hastened to offer homage and swear fidelity, received with a courtesy and majesty which I dare to say did more for the cause of our true king than a Comyn could ever do against it. Other castles followed the fate of Inverness, till at length the north, even as the south, acknowledged the Bruce not alone as their king, but as their deliverer and saviour.

"It was while rejoicing over these glorious successes, the lords and knights about the person of the sovereign began to note with great alarm that his strength seemed waning, his brow often knit as with inward pain, his eye would grow dim, and his limbs fail him, without a moment's warning, and that extreme depression would steal over his manly spirit even in the very moment of success. They watched in alarm, but silently; and when they saw the renewed earnestness and activity with which, on hearing of the approach of Comyn of Buchan, Sir John de Mowbray, and that worst of traitors, his own nephew, Sir David of Brechin, he rallied his forces, advanced to meet them, and compelled them to retreat confusedly to Aberdeen, they hoped they had been deceived, and all was well.

"But the fell disease gained ground; at first he could not guide his charger's reins, and then he could not mount at all; his voice failed, his sight passed; they were compelled to lay him in a litter, and bear him in the midst of them, and they felt as if the void left by their sovereign's absence from their head was filled with the dim shadow of death. Nobly and gallantly did Lord Edward endeavour to remedy this fatal evil; Lennox, Hay, even the two Frasers, who had so lately joined the king, seemed as if paralysed by this new grief, and hung over the Bruce's litter as if their strength waned with his. Sternly, nay, at such a moment it seemed almost harshly, Lord Edward rebuked this weakness, and conducting them to Slenath, formed some strong entrenchments, of which the Bruce's pavilion was the centre, intending there to wait his brother's recovery. Ah, my masters, if ye were not with good King Robert then, ye have escaped the bitterest trial. Ye know not what it was to behold him—the saviour of his country, the darling of his people, the noblest knight and bravest warrior who ever girded on a sword—lie there, so pale, so faint, with scarce a voice or passing sigh to say he breathed. The hand which grasped the weal of Scotland, the arm that held her shield, lay nerveless as the dead; the brain which thought so well and wisely for his fettered land lay powerless and still; the thrilling voice was hushed, the flashing eye was closed. That foes were close around him, and true friends in tears and woe beside his couch, were all alike unknown. Ah! then was the time for warrior's tears,

for men of iron frame and rugged mood to soften into woman's woe and weep. Men termed Lord Edward Bruce so harsh and stern, one whom nought of grief for others or himself could move ; they saw him not as I have. It was mine to watch my sovereign, when others sought their rest, and I have seen that rugged chieftain stand beside his brother's couch alone, unmarked, and struggle with his spirit till his brow hath knit, his lip become convulsed, and then as if it 'twere vain, all vain, sink on his knee, clasp his sovereign's hand, and bow his head and weep. 'Tis passed and over now, kind heaven be praised ! yet I cannot recall that scene, unbind the folds of memory, unmoved."

The old man passed his rough hand across his eyes, and for a brief moment paused ; his comrades, themselves affected, sought not to disturb him, and he quickly resumed.

"Days passed, and still King Robert gave no sign of amendment, except, indeed, there were intervals when his eyes wandered to the countenances of his leaders, as if he knew them, and would fain have addressed them as his wont. Then it was our men were annoyed by an incessant discharge from Buchan's archers, which though they could do perhaps no great evil, yet wounded many of our men, and roused Lord Edward's spirit to resent the insult. His determination to leave the entrenchments and retreat to Strathbogie, appeared at first an act of such unparalleled daring as to startle all his brother leaders, and they hesitated ; but there never was any long resisting Sir Edward's plans ; he bears a spell, no spirit with a spark of gallantry about him can resist. The retreat was in consequence determined on, to the great glee of our men, who were tired of inaction, and imagined they should feel their sovereign's sufferings less if engaged hand to hand with the foe, in his service, than watching him as they had lately done, and dreading yet greater evils.

"Ye have heard of this daring retreat, my friends ; it was in the mouth of every Scotsman, aye, and of Englishman too, for King Robert himself never accomplished a deed of greater skill. The king's litter was placed in the centre of a square, which presented on either side such an impenetrable fence of spears and shields, that though Buchan and De Mowbray mustered more than double our number, they never ventured an attack, and a retreat, apparently threaten-

ing total destruction, from its varied dangers, was accomplished without the loss of a single man. At Strathbogie we halted but for a short space, for finding no obstruction in our path we hastened southward, in the direction of Inverary; there we pitched the tent for the king, and taking advantage of a natural fortification, dispersed our men around it, still in a compact square. Soon after this had been accomplished, news were received that our foes were concentrating their numerous forces at Old Meldrum, scarcely two miles from us, and consequently we must hold ourselves in constant readiness to receive their attack.

"Well, the news that the enemy was so near us might not perhaps have been particularly pleasing, had they not been more than balanced by the conviction—far more precious than a large reinforcement, for in itself it was a host—the king was recovering. Yes, scarcely as we dared hope, much less believe it, the disease which had fairly baffled all the leech's art, which had hung over our idolized monarch so long, at length showed symptoms of giving way, and there was as great rejoicing in the camp as if neither danger nor misfortune could assail us more; a new spirit sparkled in every eye, as if the awakening lustre in the Bruce's glance, the still faint yet thrilling accents of a voice we had feared was hushed for ever, had lighted on every heart, and kindled anew their slumbering fire. One day, Lord Edward, the Earl of Lennox, and a gallant party were absent scouring the country about half a mile round our entrenchments, and in consequence one side of our square was more than usually open, but we did not think it signified; for there were no tidings of the enemy; well, this day the king had called me to him, and bade me relate the particulars of the retreat, which I was proud enough to do, my masters, and which of you would not be, speaking as I did with my gallant sovereign as friend with friend?"

"Aye, and does he not make us all feel this?" burst simultaneously from many voices; "does he not speak, and treat us all as if we were his friends, and not his subjects only? 'Thine was a proud task, good Murdoch, but which of us has good King Robert not addressed with kindly words and proffered hand?"

"Right! right!" joyously responded the old man; "still I say that hour was one of the proudest in my life, and an

eventful one too for Scotland ere it closed. King Robert heard me with flashing eye and kindling cheek, and his voice, as he burst forth in high praise and love for his daring brother, sounded almost as strong and thrilling as was its wont in health; just then a struggle was heard without the tent, a scuffle as of a skirmish, confused voices, clashing of weapons, and war-cries. Up started the king with eagle glance, and eager tone. 'My arms,' he cried, 'bring me my arms. Ha! hear ye that?' and sure enough, 'St. David for De Brechin, and down with the Bruce!' resounded so close, that it seemed as if but the curtain separated the traitor from his kinsman and his king. Never saw I the Bruce so fearfully aroused, the rage of the lion was upon him. 'Hear ye that,' he repeated, as, despite my remonstrances, and those of the officers who rushed into the tent, he sprang from the couch, and with the rapidity of light assumed his long-neglected armour. 'The traitorous villain! would he beard me to my teeth? By the heaven above us, he shall rue this insolence! Bring me my charger. Beaten off, say ye? I doubt it not my gallant friends; but now it is the Bruce's turn, his kindred traitors are not far off, and we would try their mettle now. Nay, restrain me not, these folk will work a cure for me,—there, I am a man again!' and as he stood upright sheathed in his glittering mail, his drawn sword in his gauntleted hand, a wild shout of irrepressible joy burst from us all, and caught up by the soldiers without the tent, echoed and re-echoed through the camp. The sudden appearance of the Bruce's charger, caparisoned for battle, standing before his master's tent, the drums rolling for the muster, the lightning speed with which Sir Edward Bruce, Lennox, and Hay, after dispersing De Brechin's troop, as dust on the plain, galloped to the royal pavilion, themselves equally at a loss to understand the bustle there, all prepared the men-at-arms for what was to come. Eagerly did the gallant knights remonstrate with their sovereign, conjure him to follow the battle in his litter, rather than attempt to mount his charger; they besought him to think what his life, his safety was to them, and not so rashly risk it. Lord Edward did entreat him to reserve his strength till there was more need; the field was then clear, the foes had not appeared; but all in vain their eloquence, the king combated it all. 'We

will go seek them, brother,' cheerily answered the king; 'we will go tell them insult to the Bruce passes not unanswered. On, on, gallant knights, our men wax impatient.' Hastening from the tent, he stood one moment in the sight of all his men, removing his helmet, he smiled a gladsome greeting. Oh, what a shout rung forth from those iron ranks! There was that noble face, pale, attenuated indeed, but beaming on them in all its wonted animation, confidence, and love; there was that majestic form towering again in its princely dignity, seeming the nobler from being so long unseen. Again and again that shout arose, till the wild birds rose screaming over our heads, in untuned yet exciting chorus. Nor did the fact that the king, strengthened as he was by his own glorious soul, had in reality not bodily force enough to mount his horse without support, take from the enthusiasm of his men, nay, it was heightened and excited to the wildest pitch. 'For Scotland and freedom!' shouted the king, as for one moment he rose in his stirrups and waved his bright blade above his head. 'For Bruce and Scotland!' swelled the answering shout. We formed, we gathered in compact array around our leaders, loudly clashed our swords against our shields; we marched a brief while slowly and majestically along the plain; we neared the foe, who with its multitude, in terrible array, awaited our coming; we saw, we hurled defiance in a shout which rent the very air. Quicker and yet quicker we advanced; on, on—we scoured the dusty plain, we pressed, we flew, we rushed upon the foe; the Bruce was at our head, and with him victory. We burst through their ranks; we compelled them at the sword's point, to turn and fight even to the death; we followed them foot to foot, and hand to hand, disputing every inch of ground; they sought to retreat, to fly—but no! Five miles of Scottish ground, five good broad miles, was that battle-field; the enemy lay dead in heaps upon the field, the remainder fled."

"And the king!" exclaimed the knight of the mask, half springing up in the excitement the old man's tale had aroused. "How bore he this day's wondrous deed—was not his strength exhausted anew?"

"Aye, what of the king," repeated many of the soldiers, who had held their very breath while the veteran spoke, and clenched their swords, as if they were joining in the strife he so energetically described.

"The king, my masters," replied Murdoch, "why, if it could be, he looked yet more the mighty warrior at the close than at the commencement of the work. We had seen him the first in the charge, in the pursuit; we had marked his white plume waving above all others, where the strife waxed hottest; and when we gathered round him, when the fight was done, he was seated on the ground in truth, and there was the dew of extreme fatigue on his brow—he had flung aside his helmet—and his cheek was hotly flushed, and his voice, as he thanked us for our gallant conduct, and bade us return thanks to heaven for this great victory, was somewhat quivering; but for all that, my masters, he looked still the warrior and the king, and his voice grew firmer and louder as he bade us have no fears for him. He dismissed us with our hearts as full of joy and love for him, as of triumph on our humbled foes."

"No doubt," responded many voices; "but Buchan, Mowbray, De Brechin—what came of them—were they left on the field?"

"They fled, loving their lives better than their honour; they fled, like cowards as they were. The two first slackened not their speed till they stood on English ground. De Brechin, ye know, held out Angus as long as he could, and was finally made captive."

"Aye, and treated with far greater lenity than the villain deserved. He will never be a Randolph."

"A Randolph! Not a footboy in Randolph's train but is more Randolph than he. But thou sayest Buchan slackened not rein till he reached English ground; he lingered long enough for yet blacker treachery, if rumour speaks aright. Was it not said the king's life was attempted by his orders, and by one of the Comyn's own followers?"

"Ha!" escaped Sir Amiot's lips. "Say they this?" but he evidently had spoken involuntarily, for the momentary agitation which had accompanied the words was instantly and forcibly suppressed.

"Aye, your worship, and it is true," replied the veteran. "It was two nights after the battle. All the camp was at rest; I was occupied as usual, by my honoured watch in my sovereign's tent. The king was sleeping soundly, and a strange drowsiness appeared creep-

ing over me too, confusing all my thoughts. At first I imagined the wind was agitating a certain corner of the tent, and my eyes, half asleep and half wakeful, became fascinated upon it; presently, what seemed a bale of carpets, only doubled up in an extraordinary small space, appeared within the drapery. It moved; my senses were instantly aroused. Slowly and cautiously the bale grew taller, then the unfolding carpet fell, and a short, well-knit, muscular form appeared. He was clothed in those padded jerkins and hose, plaited with steel, which are usual to those of his rank; the steel, however, this night was covered with thin, black stuff, evidently to assist concealment. He looked cautiously around him. I had crept noiselessly; and on all fours, within the shadow of the king's couch, where I could observe the villain's movements myself unseen. I saw a gleam of triumph twinkle in his eye, so sure he seemed of his intended victim. He advanced; his dagger flashed above the Bruce. With one bound, one shout, I sprang on the murderous wretch, wrenched the dagger from his grasp, and dashed him to the earth. He struggled, but in vain; the king started from that deep slumber, one moment gazed around him bewildered, the next was on his feet, and by my side. The soldiers rushed into the tent, and confusion for the moment waxed loud and warm; but the king quelled it with a word. The villain was raised, pinioned, brought before the Bruce, who sternly demanded what was his intent, and who was his employer. Awhile the miscreant paused, but then, as if spell-bound by the flashing orb upon him, confessed the whole, aye, and more; that his master, the Earl of Buchan, had sworn a deep and deadly oath to relax not in his hot pursuit till the life-blood of the Bruce had avenged the death of the Red Comyn, and that, though he had escaped now, he must fall at length; for the whole race of Comyn had joined hands upon their chieftain's oath. The brow of the king grew dark, terrible wrath beamed from his eyes, and it seemed for the moment as if he would deliver up the murderous villain into the hands that yearned to tear him piecemeal. There was a struggle, brief yet terrible, then he spoke, and calmly, yet with a bitter stinging scorn.

“‘And this is Buchan's oath,’ he said. ‘Ha! doth he not bravely, my friends, to fly the battle-field, to shun

us there, that hireling hands may do a deed he dares not? For this poor fool, what shall we do with him?"

"'Death, death—torture and death! what else befits the sacrilegious traitor?' burst from many voices, pressing forward to seize and bear him from the tent; but the king signed them to forbear, and oh, what a smile took the place of his previous scorn!"

"'And I say neither torture nor death, my friends,' he cried. 'What, are we sunk so low, as to revenge this insult on a mere tool, the instrument of a villainous master? No, no! let him go free, and tell his lord how little the Bruce heeds him; that guarded as he is by a free people's love, were the race of Comyn as powerful and numerous as England's self, their oath would avail them nothing. Let the poor fool go free!'"

"A deep, wild murmur ran through the now-crowded tent, and so mingled were the tones of applause and execration, we knew not which the most prevailed.

"'And shall there be no vengeance for this dastard deed?' at length the deep, full voice of Lord Edward Bruce arose, distinct above the rest. 'Shall the Bruce sit tamely down to await the working of the villain oath, and bid its tools go free, filling the whole land with well-trained murderers? Shall Buchan pass scathless, to weave yet darker, more atrocious schemes?'"

"'Brother, no,' frankly rejoined the king. 'We will make free to go and visit our friends in Buchan, and there, an thou wilt, thou shalt pay them in coin for their kindly intents and deeds towards us; but for this poor fool, again I say, let him go free. Misery and death, God wot, we are compelled to for our country's sake, let us spare where but our own person is endangered.'"

"And they let him free, my masters, unwise as it seemed to us; none could gainsay our sovereign's words. Sullen to the last, the only symptom of gratitude he vouchsafed was to mutter forth, in answer to the Bruce's warning words to hie him to his comrades in Buchan, and bid them, an they feared fire and devastation, to fly without delay, 'Aye, only thus mayest thou hope to exterminate the traitors; pity none, spare none. The whole district of Buchan is peopled by the Comyn, bound by this oath of blood,' and thus he departed."

"And spoke he truth?" demanded Sir Amiot, hoarsely, and with an agitation that, had others more suspicious been with him, must have been remarked, although forcibly and painfully suppressed; "spoke he truth? Methought the district of Buchan had only within the last century belonged to the Comyn, and that the descendants of the Countess Margaret's vassals still kept apart, loving not the intermixture of another clan. Said they not it was on this account the Countess of Buchan had exercised such influence, and herself headed a gallant troop at the first rising of the Bruce? an the villain spoke truth, whence came this change?"

"Why, for that matter, your worship, it is easy enough explained," answered Murdoch, "and, trust me, King Robert set inquiries enough afloat ere he commenced his scheme of retaliation. Had there been one of the Lady Isabella's own followers there, one who, in her name, claimed his protection, he would have given it; not a hair of their heads would have been injured; but there were none of these, your worship. The few of the original clan which had not joined him were scattered all over the country, mingling with other loyal clans; their own master had hunted them away, when he came down to his own districts, just before the capture of his wife and son. He filled the Tower of Buchan with his own creatures, scattered the Comyns all over the land, with express commands to attack, hunt, or resist all of the name of Bruce to the last ebb of their existence. He left amongst them officers and knights as traitorous, and spirits well-nigh as evil as his own, and they obeyed him to the letter, for amongst the most inveterate, the most treacherous, and most dishonourable persecutors of the Bruce stood first and foremost the Comyns of Buchan. Ah! the land was changed from the time when the noble countess held sway there, and so they felt to their cost.

"It was a grand yet fearful sight, those low hanging woods and glens all in one flame; the spring had been particularly dry and windy, and the branches caught almost with a spark, and crackled and sparkled, and blazed, and roared, till for miles round we could see and hear the work of devastation. Aye, the coward earl little knew what was passing in his territories, while he congratulated himself on

his safe flight into England. It was a just vengeance, a deserved though terrible retaliation, and the king felt it as such, my masters. He had borne with the villains as long as he could, and would have borne with them still, had he not truly felt nothing would quench their enmity, and in consequence secure Scotland's peace and safety, but their utter extermination, and all the time he regretted it, I know, for there was a terrible look of sternness and determination about him while the work lasted; he never relaxed into a smile, he never uttered a jovial word, and we followed him, our own wild spirits awed into unwonted silence. There was not a vestige of natural or human life in the district—all was one mass of black, discoloured ashes, utter ruin and appalling devastation. Not a tower of Buchan remains."

"All—sayest thou all?" said Sir Amiot, suddenly, yet slowly, and with difficulty. "Left not the Bruce one to bear his standard and thus mark his power?"

"Has not your worship remarked that such is never the Bruce's policy? Three years ago, he had not force enough to fortify the castles he took from the English, and leaving them standing did but offer safe harbours for the foe, so it was ever his custom to dismantle, as utterly to prevent their re-establishment; and if he did this with the castles of his own friends, who all, as the Douglas saith, 'love better to hear the lark sing than the mouse squeak,' it was not likely he would spare Buchan's. But there was one castle, I remember, cost him a bitter struggle to demolish. It was the central fortress of the district, distinguished, I believe, by the name of 'the Tower of Buchan,' and had been the residence of that right noble lady the Countess Isabella and her children. Nay, from what I overheard his grace say to Lord Edward, it had formerly given him shelter and right noble hospitality, and a dearer, more precious remembrance still to his noble heart—it had been for many months the happy home of his brother, Sir Nigel, and we know what magic power all associated with *him* has upon the king; and had it not been for the expostulations of Lord Edward, his rough yet earnest entreaty, methinks that fortress had been standing yet. That sternness, terrible to behold, for it ever tells of some mighty inward passions conquered, again gathered on our

sovereign's brow, but he turned his charger's head, and left to Lord Edward the destruction of the fortress, and he made quick work of it, you will scarce find two stones together of its walls."

"He counselled right," echoed many voices, the eagerness with which they had listened, and now spoke, effectually turning their attention from their mysterious leader, who at old Murdoch's last words had with difficulty prevented the utterance of a deep groan, and then, as if startled at his own emotion, sprung up from his reclining posture, and joined his voice to those of his men. "He counselled, and did rightly," they repeated; "it would have been an ill deed to spare a traitor's den for such softening thoughts. Could we but free the Countess Isabella, she would not want a home in Buchan—nay, the further from her cruel husband's territories the better; and for her children—the one, poor innocent, is cared for, and the other—

"Aye, my masters, and trust me, that other was in our sovereign's heart as forcibly as the memories he spoke. That which we know now concerning him was then undreamed of; it was only faintly rumoured that Lord Douglas had been deceived, and Alan of Buchan had not fallen by a father's hand, or at least by his orders; that he was in life, in close confinement; my old ears did catch something of this import from the king, as he spoke with his brother."

"What import?" asked Sir Amiot, hoarsely.

"Only, your worship, that, for the sake of the young heir of Buchan, he wished that such total devastation could have been spared; if he were really in life, as rumour said, it was hard to act as if he were forgotten by his friends."

"And what was Sir Edward's reply?"

"First, that he doubted the rumour altogether; secondly, that if he did return to the king, his loss might be more than made up; and thirdly, that it was more than probable that, young as he was, if he really did live, the arts of his father would prevail, and he would purchase his freedom by homage and fidelity to England."

"Ha! said he so—and the king?"

"Did not then think with him, nay, declared he would stake his right hand that the boy, young as he was, had too

much of his mother's noble spirit for such a deed. It was well the stake was not accepted, for, by St. Andrew, as the tale now goes, King Robert would have lost."

"As the tale now goes, thou unbelieving sceptic," replied one of his comrades, laughing; "has not the gallant been seen, recognised—is he not known as one of King Edward's minions, and lords it bravely? But hark! there are chargers pricking over the plain. Hurrah! Sir Edward and Lord James," and on came a large body of troopers and infantry even as he spoke.

Up started Sir Amiot's men in eager readiness to greet and join; their armour and weapons they had laid aside were resumed, and ere their comrades reached them all were in readiness. Sir Amiot, attended by his esquires and a page, galloped forward, and the two knights, perceiving his advance, spurred on before their men; and hasty and cordial greetings were exchanged. We should perhaps note that Sir Amiot's manner slightly differed in his salutation of the two knights. To Lord Edward Bruce he was eager, frank, cordial, as that knight himself; to the other, whom one glance proclaimed as the renowned James Lord Douglas, there was an appearance of pride or reserve, and it seemed an effort to speak with him at all. Douglas perhaps did not perceive this, or was accustomed to it, for it seemed to affect him little; and Lord Edward's bluff address prevented all manifestation of difference between his colleagues, even if there existed any.

"Ready to mount and ride; why that's well," he cried. "We are beyond our time, but it is little reck, we need but spur the faster, which our men all seem inclined to do. What news? why none since we parted, save that his grace has resolved on the siege of Perth without further delay."

"Nay, but that is news, so please you," replied Sir Amiot. "When I parted from his grace there was no talk of it."

There was a talk of it, but no certainty; for our royal brother kept his own counsel, and spoke not of this much-desired event till his way lay clear before him. There have been some turbulent spirits in the camp—your humble servant, this black lord, and Randolph amongst them—who in truth conspired to let his grace know no peace by night or

day till this object was attained; but our prudent monarch gave us little heed till his wiser brain arranged the matters we but burned to execute."

"And what, think you, fixed this resolve?"

"Simply that for a time we are clear of English thieves and Norman rogues, and can march northward, and sit down before Perth without fear of being called southward again. Edward will have enow on his hands to keep his own frontiers from invasion; 'twill be some time ere he see the extent of our vengeance, and meanwhile our drift is gained."

"Aye, it were a sin and crying shame to let Perth remain longer in English hands," rejoined Douglas; "strongly garrisoned it may be, but what matter?"

"What matter! why, 'tis great matter," replied Sir Edward, joyously. "What glory were it to sit down before a place and take it at first charge. No, give me good fighting, tough assault, and brave defence. Think you I would have so urged the king, did I not scent a glorious struggle before the walls? Strongly garrisoned! I would not give one link of this gold chain for it, were it not. But a truce to this idle parley; we must make some miles ere nightfall. Sir Knight of the Branch, do your men need further rest? if not give the word, and let them fall in with their comrades, and on."

"Whither?" demanded Sir Amiot, as he gave the required orders. "Where meet we the king?"

"In the Glen of Auchterader, south of the Erne. Lady Campbell and Isoline await us there, with the troops left as their guard at Dumbarton. So you perceive our friend Lord Douglas here hath double cause to use the spur, times like these afford little leisure for wooing, and such love-stricken gallants as himself must e'en make the most of them."

"And trust me for doing so," laughingly rejoined Douglas. "Scoff at me as you will, Edward, your time will come."

"Not it," answered the warrior; "glory is my mistress, I love better to clasp my true steel than the softest and fairest hand in Christendom; to caress my noble steed and twine my hand thus in his flowing mane, and feel that he

bears me gallantly and proudly wherever my spirit lists, than to press sweet kisses on a rosy lip, imprisoned by a woman's smile."

"Nay, shame on thee!" replied Douglas, still jestingly. "Thou a true knight, and speak thus; were there not other work to do, I would e'en run a tilt with thee, to compel thee to forswear thy foul treason against the fair."

"Better spend thy leisure in wooing Isoline; trust me, she will not be won ere wooed. How now, Sir Knight of the Branch, has the fiend melancholy taken possession of thee again? give her a thrust with thy lance, good friend, and unseat her. Come, soul of fire as thou art in battle, why dost thou mope in ashes in peace? Thou speakest neither for nor against these matters of love; wilt woo or scorn the little god?"

"Perchance both, perchance neither," replied the knight, and his voice sounded sadly, though he evidently sought to speak in jest. He had fallen back from the side of Douglas during the previous conversation, but the flashing eye denoted that it had passed not unremarked. He now rode up to the side of Lord Edward, keeping a good spear's length from Lord James, and their converse turning on martial subjects, became more general. Their march being performed without any incident of note, we will, instead of following them, take a brief retrospective glance on those historical events which had so completely and gloriously turned the fate of Scotland and her patriots, in those five years which the thread of our narrative compels us to leave a blank.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

CHANGED indeed was the aspect of Scotland and the fortunes of her king, in the autumn of 1311, than when we last beheld them, at the close of 1306. Then heavier and blacker had the wings of the tempest enshrouded them; night—the awful night of slavery, persecution, tyranny—had closed around them, without one star in her ebon mantle, one little ray to penetrate the thick mists, and breathe of brighter things. But now hope, hand in hand with liberty,

stood on the broad fields and fertile glens of Scotland ; her wings unloosed and bright ; her aspect full of smiles, of love ; her voice thrilling to every Scotsman's heart, and nerving him with yet stronger energy, even when freedom was attained. One by one had stars of resplendent lustre shone through the misty veil of night ; one by one had mists and clouds rolled up and fled, and the pure and spangled heavens looked down upon the free. The day-star was lit, the sun of glory had arisen, and Robert Bruce, in the autumn of 1311, was king in something more than name !

Yet not without the most persevering toil, the most unexampled patience, the most determined resolution, foresight, and self-control, not without a self-government of temper, passion, spirit, which man has seldom equalled, and most certainly never surpassed, had these things been accomplished. Destined in the end to be the saviour of his country, it did indeed seem as if that same Almighty power who so destined him, who turned even his one evil deed to good, had manifested His judgment and His power to him, as to His servants of olden time. Fearfully was that involuntary crime chastised, ere power and glory, even freedom was vouchsafed. His own sufferings, exile, persecution, defeat, the constant danger of his life, would have been in themselves sufficient evidence of an all-seeing Judge ; but in the death, the cruel death of too many of his noble friends, men whose fidelity and worth had twined them round his very heartstrings, whose loss was fraught with infinitely deeper anguish than his own individual woes, we may trace still clearer the hand of vengeance, tempered still with long-suffering, yet unending mercy.

From the time of his landing in Scotland, called there as his contemporaries declare by a supernatural signal from Turnberry Head, the success of the Bruce certainly may be said to commence ; though it was not till the death of their powerful enemy, Edward of England, in July, 1307, that the Scottish people permitted themselves to hope and feel their chains were falling, and they might yet be free.

Accustomed to elude the enemy by dispersing his men into small parties, the Bruce had repeatedly conquered much greater numbers than his own, and spread universal alarm amidst the English, by the suddenness and extraordinary

skill of his military movements ; that these dispersions repeatedly perilled his own life King Robert never heeded. His own courage and foresight and the unwavering fidelity of his followers so frequently interposed between himself and treachery, that at length danger itself became little more than excitement and adventure. The victory of Loudon Hill amply revenged on Pembroke the defeat at Methven, compelling both him and the Earl of Gloucester to retreat to Ayrshire ; and from the splendour which accrued from it on the arms of the Bruce, obtained him the yet more desirable advantage of strong reinforcements of men, arms, and treasure, and enabled him to pursue his success, by driving the English back almost to the borders of their own land. Skirmish after skirmish, battle after battle followed, carried on with such surpassing skill and courage by the Bruce, that his call to battle was at length hailed by his men as a summons to victory. Finished in all the exercises of chivalry in the court of Edward, in the wisdom, prudence, and tactics of a general, Robert Bruce had *bought* his experience, and was in consequence yet more fitted for the important post he filled, at the same time that his dazzling, chivalric qualities gained him at once the admiration and confidence of his people.

Although perchance it was not till the momentous words "Edward is dead" rang through Scotland with clarion tongue, and thrilled to the hearts of her sons, that even the most lukewarm started from their sluggish sleep, girded their swords to their sides, and hastened to join their rightful king, and yet more hope and courage and enthusiasm fired the breasts of her already-devoted patriots, yet enough had been already accomplished by the Bruce to fill the last moments of the dying king with the bitterest emotions of disappointed ambition, hatred, and revenge.

From Burgh-upon-Sands, where his strength had so drooped he could not proceed farther, despite his fixed resolve to hurl fire and sword on the only land which had dared his power—where the sovereign of England lay awaiting his last hour—the hills of Scotland were visible, and he felt that land was free ! that the toil, the waste, the dreams of twenty years were vain ; the vision of haughty ambition, of grasping power had fled for ever. Death was on his heart, and Scotland was unconquered, and would be glorious yet.

He felt, he knew this ; for in this hour of waning power, of fading life, fell the chains of Scotland. His instructions to his son, partaking as they do infinitely less of a civilized and enlightened monarch (for such was Edward, ere ambition crept into his soul) than of the barbarous customs of a savage chief, have betrayed to posterity that such were his feelings. The imbecile, uncertain character of the prince was too well known for his father to place any reliance upon him even if his last commands were obeyed, and one little month after his death sufficed to prove both to English and Scotch that the prognostics of each were verified.

Sir John de Bretagne, Earl of Richmond, and the Earl of Pembroke were alternately named guardians of Scotland by the fickle Edward, who satisfying his conscience with that measure, hastened back to London, there to enjoy in luxurious peace the society of Gaveston and other favourites, bearing with him the dead body of his father, whose last commands he thought fit, perhaps with some degree of wisdom, to disobey.

King Robert, however, perceiving that the Scottish guardians were collecting a much larger army than would permit him to stand the brunt of battle, thought it wiser to lure them to the northern districts of Scotland, where their forces could not be so easily increased, and where their total ignorance of the ground would ably assist his measures against them. James of Douglas he left in Ettrick, to continue the struggle there, and nobly did that gallant soldier execute his trust. It was during this war in the north that the illness of the king, the insult of his foes, and the harrying of Buchan took place, as described by old Murdoch in the previous chapter. The citadels of Aberdeen, Forfar, and others of equal strength and importance, surrendered and were dismantled ; and perceiving the most brilliant success had crowned his efforts in the north, he divided his forces, despatching them under able leaders in various directions, thus to separate the English invaders, and prevent their compelling him to give them battle in a body as at Falkirk, and deciding the fate of Scotland at a blow.

Douglas, Tweeddale, and Ettrick were conquered by Lord James ; and Galloway, despite the furious defence of its native chiefs and English allies, aided by the savage nature

of its country, was finally brought into subjection by Edward Bruce, to whose wild and reckless spirit this daring warfare had been peculiarly congenial. On every side success had crowned the Bruce, and then it was he projected and carried into effect his long-desired vengeance on the Lords of Lorn, whose persecuting enmity demanded such return. Their defeat was total, despite their advantageous situation in the formidable pass of Cruachan Ben, where that great mountain sinks down to the banks of Loch Awe, a road full of precipices on one side, and a deep lake on the other. The Bruce, following his usual admirable plan of tactics, sent Douglas with some light troops to surround the mountain and turn the pass, himself covering the movement by a threatened assault in front, and thus attacked in rear, flank, and van at once, all advantage of ground was lost, and the Lords of Lorn, both father and son, compelled to escape by sea, leaving the greater part of their clan dead upon the field.

The vacillating measures of the second Edward in vain endeavoured to remedy these evils; the barons of England, already disgusted at his unjust preference for upstart minions, either obeyed the royal commands for fresh musters of forces or neglected them, according to individual pleasure. Their own interests kept them in England; for, mistrusting their king and hating his favourites, they imagined their absence would but increase the power of the latter, and effectually remove the former from their control. Scotland was now a secondary object with almost all the English nobles; their own prerogatives, their own private interests were at stake.

Meanwhile, the measures of that now liberated land proceeded with a steadiness, a wisdom, presenting a forcible contrast to those of her former captors. For the first time for many troubled years the estates of the kingdom assembled, and by a large and powerful body of representatives declared, in all proper and solemn form, that Edward's previous award of the crown to John Baliol was illegal, unjust, and void; that the late deceased Lord of Annandale was the only heir to the crown, and, in consequence, his grandson, Robert the Bruce, alone could be recognised as king; and all who dared dispute or deny this right were denounced, and would henceforth be prosecuted as traitors and

abettors of treason; and not alone by the laity were these important matters acknowledged and proclaimed, the clergy of the kingdom, braving the bull of excommunication once promulgated against him, issued a solemn charge to their spiritual flocks, desiring them to recognise the Bruce as their sovereign.

Roused at length into action, Edward assembled a formidable army at Berwick, and entered Scotland, but too late in the season to effect any movement of consequence. Bruce, as usual, avoiding any decisive action, harassed their march, cut off their provisions, desolated the country, so that it could present nothing but waste and barren deserts to its invaders, and finally caused Edward to retreat to England out of all patience, and eager to solace himself with his queen and his favourites at Carlisle. A second, third, and fourth expedition were planned and despatched against Scotland, but all equally in vain; the last, headed by Gaveston, who, despite his foppery and presumption, had all the qualities of a brave knight and skilful general, advanced as far as the Frith of Forth, finding, however, neither man, woman, nor child, cattle nor provender—all as usual was desolate. The villagers, emulating the courage and forbearance of their sovereign, retreated without a murmur to the Highlands, carrying with them all of their property that permitted removal, although the extreme severity of the season, and the various inconveniences resulting from a residence of some length amid morasses and precipices, rendered this test of their patriotism more than ordinarily severe.

It was in retaliation for these invasions King Robert planned and executed that expedition against England, from which Sir Amiot and his men were leisurely returning at the commencement of this chapter. He waited but to see his own land clear of her invaders, and then like a mountain torrent poured down his fury on the English frontier. It appeared as if Gaveston had scarce returned to his master, with the assurance that the Scottish king was too far north for any new disturbance at present, when the news of his appearance on the very threshold of England burst on the astounded king. It was vain to think of resisting him. For fifteen days the Bruce remained in England, paying in kind the injuries so unjustly inflicted upon

himself; and on returning found the little loss he had sustained amply compensated by the increase of animation and glee in his troops, and yet more substantially by the treasure and money amassed, for the northern counties had found it necessary to purchase his forbearance; and Robert rejoiced that it was so, simply that it enabled him in a measure to repay his devoted subjects for the loyalty they had ever manifested towards his person, and the aid they had hastened to bestow in the liberation of their land.

With regard to the other characters of our tale, so little change had taken place in their fates since we last beheld them, and that change will so easily be traced in the succeeding pages, that there is little need to linger upon them.

There was still a shade of sadness tinging the royal scutcheon of the Bruce. His wife, his child, his sisters, and other near and dear relatives and friends, were still in the power of Edward, and from the desultory warfare, to which the interests of his country compelled him to adhere, there seemed as yet but little chance of his effecting their liberation. Ransom so high as Edward would demand (if indeed he would accept it at all) the Bruce could not pay, without anew impoverishing his kingdom, and laying heavy taxes on a people ever ready to sacrifice their all for him, and this his character was far too exalted and unselfish even to think upon. The only means of obtaining their freedom was an exchange of prisoners, and this was ineffectual. He defeated, harassed, and compelled the English to evacuate Scotland, but, from his avoidance of general engagements, he had taken no prisoners whose rank and consequence would weigh against the detention of his relatives; and there was one amid those captives whom, from most unjustifiable severity and degradation of a cruel public confinement, the Bruce and his noble followers burned to release. But the citadel of Berwick, where they believed the Countess of Buchan still to be immured—for the cage was still apparent—by its immense strength, numerous garrison, and closely-fortified town, was as yet an object of desire indeed, but one not possible to be attained, and from that very feeling the Bruce had rather avoided it in his invasion of England.

The Earl of Buchan, it was rumoured and believed, had

died in England, and was imagined to have left his title and estates to his son, who, soon after the death of Edward I., had been heard of in Scotland as having become a devoted adherent to the court, and more particularly to the person of King Edward, who lavished on him so many favours, that it was supposed his former boyish folly in adhering to the Bruce and Scotland was entirely forgotten. Rumour said he had often been heard bitterly to regret the past, and had solemnly sworn fidelity to England. In what manner this rumour was regarded by King Robert and his patriots our tale will show, as also the fate of Agnes.

The Earl of Fife, loving better the rich costume, merry idlesse, and sumptuous fare of a courtier, than the heavy armour, fatiguing duties, and hasty meals of a knight, thought it wiser to foreswear his dislike to King Robert, the pursuance of it involving a vast deal of fatigue and danger, and consequently remained a neutral in King Edward's court, keeping aloof from all the quarrels of Gaveston and the barons, and too much wrapt in his own luxurious selfishness to be heeded by either party.

Gloucester and his noble wife belong to history, and consequently not at present to us. We shall meet the latter again in a future page.

Amid all his wanderings and various fortunes, two of the gentler sex, his own near relatives, had remained constant to the Bruce. Now, indeed, their train and attendants were much increased; but there had been times when the Lady Campbell and her daughter Isoline had been alone of their sex beside their king. It will be remembered that, when that painful parting took place between the patriot warriors and those devoted females who had attended them so long, Sir Niel Campbell, the better to appeal to the chivalric feelings of the Lord of the Isles, had consented to his wife's earnest solicitation to accompany him; and also that, despite all his and King Robert's entreaty to the contrary, she had insisted on herself and Isoline sharing their hardships in the retreat of Rathlin, instead of accepting the eagerly-proffered hospitality of the island chief. They were, indeed, as ministering spirits in that dreary retreat, ever ready to tend, soothe, cheer, to give bright example of patient fortitude, when that of the

sterner sex seemed failing; they either suffered not more than their companions, or refused to own or show that they did, for Isoline, although at first a mere child in years, gave good evidence that all the noble and endearing qualities of her mother's line were hers; and when the fate of the queen and her attendants was made known, how earnestly did not only Sir Niel but good King Robert himself rejoice that two at least of those near and dear relatives were spared them, and as earnestly wish they had never parted from the rest.

Fatiguing and precarious as their life was in the Bruce's train, compelled at a moment's warning to march from a brief resting-place, often even to adopt other guise than their own, still these devoted females were ever found beside their king, and if Lady Campbell had ever felt anxiety as to the effects these wanderings would have upon the health and beauty of her child, they were, at the time we resume our tale, entirely removed; for Isoline Campbell at nineteen might have borne the palm alike of beauty, truth, and dignity from those born and bred in a peaceful court, and shielded with the tenderest care from aught like outward tempest or inward storms. To most of the youthful knights in her uncle's camp, it had been only the last two years that she had burst upon them as some beautiful spirit, whose existence they could scarce trace to the merry mountain child they had first known, and to whom they had in sport taught the use of many a chivalric weapon. No arrow was more true to its mark than Isoline's; but latterly, that the state of her uncle's court permitted her the privileges due to her sex and rank, security and rest, and perhaps, too, that she was conscious girlhood was fast merging into a higher state of being, demanding more reserve, and quietness and dignity, certain it was these sports were laid aside, and her former companions bowed before her beauty and owned its spell, as to one they had only lately known. One indeed saw but the perfecting of charms he had long admired; yet few suspected the Lord James of Douglas, whose every thought and speech seemed of war and freedom, had time for dreams of love, and that her image had dwelt next his heart even when her preceptor in all chivalric sports, her guardian in their hasty marches, the gallant knight who

was ever the first to find some suitable halting-place, collect fresh heath for her couch, some dainty of fish or fowl to woo her to the rustic board, services she had ever met with a joyous jest or thrilling laugh, or some deed of merry mischief. Within the last two years her manner to him too had changed; but it differed not an atom from that with which she ever treated all the other knights, and Douglas could not therefore, as he wished and at first hoped, argue favourably for himself.

Of one other personage, as a character totally unknown to our former pages, we must say a few words, and then, craving pardon for this long digression, proceed to more active scenes.

It was in the pass of Ben Cruachan, in the fierce struggle between himself and the men of Lorn, King Robert became aware of the presence of a stranger knight, who, remaining close as a shadow by his side during the whole of the action, had fought with a skill, courage, and almost desperation, that at once riveted upon him the attention of the king, ever alive to aught of gallantry or chivalry in his leaders—an attention heightened by the fact, that twice or thrice the knight's great prowess and agility had saved his own person from imminent danger. He appeared on the watch to avert and defeat every attempt to surround and crush the king; thrusting himself in the very midst of couched spears and pointed swords, and thus, by the imminent risk of his own life or liberty, covering the king when too hard pressed upon, and enabling him to regain his footing, and press with renewed power on the foe. Much marvel indeed his appearance occasioned even in the heat and rush of battle, for his armour, the bearings of his shield, nay, his very mode of fighting, distinguished him as a stranger.

Eagerly the monarch looked to the close of that triumphant day, to bring this new recruit before him, almost fearing he would vanish as suddenly and mysteriously as he had appeared, but he was not disappointed. That same evening, as he stood on a ledge of rock about an acre square, surrounded by his gallant leaders, and in sight of all his men, who were rejoicing in their great and decisive triumph, the feud between the houses of Bruce and Comyn perhaps adding more zest to their feelings, the stranger knight approached, and kneeling before the king,

besought his acceptance of his services as a soldier, his homage as a subject, and solemnly swearing fidelity to his person and his cause in both these characters. There was a peculiar and most thrilling mournfulness in his voice, seeming almost indefinitely to denote him a younger man than he had previously appeared, and the solemn earnestness of his entreaty appeared to express a more than common interest in the Bruce's reply. His services were as frankly accepted as they had been tendered, and warmly the king admired, praised, and acknowledged how much he had been indebted to the extraordinary gallantry shown in the previous engagement, adding, with a smile, that he hoped the knight intended to satisfy the curiosity that brave conduct had engendered, and remember it was not customary to tender the homage of a subject with the helmet on and vizor down. With the same melancholy earnestness of expression which had marked his previous address, the stranger replied he was aware of this, and therefore was it that he knelt before the Bruce more as a suppliant, than proffering to him that which was his right; his helmet he could indeed remove, but he was under a solemn vow never to reveal his features, birth, or rank till, either by his aid or through his personal agency, a deed had been accomplished, and freedom given to one of high and noble birth, unjustly and cruelly detained a prisoner by Edward, King of England.

"Nay, for that we may go hand in hand with you, young sir," answered the king; "there is many a noble prisoner in the realm of England we would fain see released, but ere that may be accomplished, I fear me some years must pass. Thine was a rash vow; did ye deem its penance but of short duration? I could have wished it otherwise, for in our small, well-known, and well-tried train mystery were better shunned."

"My liege," replied the young man, with an earnestness almost startling, "I thought not, reckoned not of the lapse of time in the adherence to this vow; till its work be accomplished, till the freedom of one removes all mystery from me, there is neither rest, nor joy, nor glory for the heart now speaking to your grace. What boots it then to think of time? My honour and my life are wrapt up in the prisoner whose liberty I seek, and till that be accomplished, there is

no privation, no penance in the adherence to my vow. I have no name, no follower, nought but mine own good sword and stainless truth, and the memory of knighthood from a hand, bold, noble, glorious as your grace's own. I ask but permission to follow thee, to serve my country and my king; even in the performance of my vow, in serving thee alone, may I hope for its accomplishment, and in its accomplishment I shall do good service to thy cause."

"But if so much depends upon another, and that other a prisoner in the power of Edward, tell me, young sir, for we may scarce reckon with certainty on human life, how will it be with thee an the prisoner on whom so much depends live not to be released by man?"

"Then I, too, may die unknown, for there will be none to mourn me," burst from the knight's lips, in tones of such passionate agony, it thrilled to the rudest spirit present, and King Robert instantly raised him from the ground, bending, as he did so, to conceal the deep sympathy he felt was stamped upon his brow.

"Nay, nay," he said, with extreme kindness, "I meant not to call forth such emotion by a suggestion that, after all, perhaps there needed not. We accept the services so nobly tendered; we give thee full liberty to adhere to thy solemn vow, and for thy truth and honour we will ourselves be answerable."

Vows similar to that of the stranger, nay, often made for causes much more trivial, were too much in the spirit of chivalry to occasion any drawback in his favour. Already prepossessed by his gallant bearing, his apparent perfection in all knightly exercises, and perhaps still more from the tone of touching sadness which pervaded his manner and address, the warriors crowded round, and lavished on him cordiality and kindness.

From that day Sir Amiot de la Branche, for so he became universally denominated, from the bearings on his shield, had been among the first amidst the Bruce's leaders remarkable for bravery, untiring fortitude, and most unwearying activity. At first, at his own request, he simply fought as a knight and soldier in the king's own private guard, but gradually his great services and excellent counsel raised him higher and higher in the estimation of all, more particu-

larly in that of the Bruce, whose talent for discovering the characters of his knights, and so guiding their various services, as always to assign them that which was most congenial, was something remarkable, and at length he became, at the king's own especial request, leader of a gallant troop of picked men, many of whom had themselves requested permission to follow his banner, and in consequence, the fifty named by the king speedily swelled to double that number.

Three years had now passed since his first appearance, and still his vow was inviolably kept, for, as we have already noticed, despite the increasing glory and greatness of the Bruce, the Scottish prisoners still remained in custody in England. Within the last year, indeed, he was seen more often mingling with other knights around the Lady Isoline, but even then there was no evidence of a relaxation in his sadness; nay, could the thought of his private hours have been read, men would have seen contending emotions struggling at his heart, both equally intense, and that, perchance, the fulfilment of his vow was not now his *only* impulse—the sole end and being of his life indeed it still was, but perchance it comprised yet more than the liberation of another.

It was strange that in these three years all concerning this important prisoner had never been discovered, nor made much subject of discussion. Some imagined a near relative, perhaps a father, who had not always been faithful to the Bruce's interests, and consequently the son wished to earn himself a name ere his own was divulged. But by far the greater number settled in their own minds that it was a lady love he had bound himself to release; and this idea obtained so much dominion, that almost all the court and camp of Bruce found themselves believing it, as steadily as if the knight had himself confirmed it, and thus removing the *mystery*, all curiosity departed also. Sir Amiot might have heard these rumours, but he gave them little heed, and by his silence encouraged all the vagaries of fancy in which his companions chose to indulge. He went on his way in public, reserved, sad, cold, nay, almost stern; in private, well-nigh crushed beneath the struggle of the spirit and bitterness of soul, all, all the wretchedness combined in that one word—*alone*.

CHAPTER XXIX.

It was a gay and brilliant scene which the royal pavilion presented a few nights after King Robert, his various leaders and their respective troops, had met and united, amidst the luxuriant meadows, glens, and hills of Perthshire. About ten miles south-west of the city of Perth, which was to be the next object of attack, the tents were pitched, and wood, rock, and water combined to render the site as picturesque as can well be imagined.

The king's pavilion, which was now adorned with all that could mark and add dignity to his royal rank, was erected in a sort of hollow, formed by overhanging cliffs, and environed by thick trees. It was usually divided into two compartments, outer and inner, and lined with brocade of Scotland's national blue, bordered with a broad fringe of silver. A thick curtain, and narrow passage formed by the rock, separated the royal tent from that of the Lady Campbell and her train, which was furnished with many a luxury that the English fugitives, in their various expeditions, had left behind them, and formed a strange contrast to the miserable huts and caves which but a very few years previous had formed their homes. Undeterred by the unhappy fate of those noble females originally in King Robert's train, the wives and daughters of those noble men who had gradually thronged anew round the banner of the Bruce hastened to pay their homage, and swell the train of the Lady Campbell, as soon as the reviving fortunes of the king permitted such increase. Now some fifteen or twenty noble maidens and matrons, exclusive of their humbler attendants, were assembled, and by the beauty of the former, the dignity and mild demeanour of the latter, added a grace and polish to King Robert's mountain court, which without them perchance had scarce been found.

The night of which we speak, the two compartments of the royal tent had been thrown into one, and consequently

offered space enough for the chivalry and beauty which the king's command had there assembled ; the floor was inlaid with squares of moss, from the darkest to the lightest green, the palest pink to the deepest crimson, giving the appearance of rich mosaic, and offering a soft delicious resting to the fairy feet which pressed it ; garlands of oak, interspersed with flowers of the heath, and supporting gay banners and pennons, many of which had been taken from the foe, hung from the brocaded walls, whose stars of silver glimmered brightly and sparkling in the light of innumerable lamps which illumined the tent with radiance equal to the day. The broad banner of Scotland marked the upper end of the pavilion, where a dais was erected, seemingly for the king and his immediate family, although it was little needed, for they mingled indiscriminately with their guests. Many a knight had doffed his heavy harness, and though they laughingly declared they had well-nigh forgotten how to assume a garb of peace fitted for courtly festivity, yet they contrived to give themselves an appearance of gay and splendid costume, that might have vied with the more luxurious courtiers of England ; velvets and satins slashed with gold and silver mingled gaily with the shining steel of the half armour which many were compelled to retain from lack of other clothing. There was good King Robert, somewhat more aged in feature than we last beheld him, though but little more than five years had passed, the lines of his countenance were deeper and more strongly marked, his cheek was paler, the brow and eye more thoughtful, and here and there a silver thread peeped through the rich brown masses of his hair ; there was Lord Edward Bruce, the only one of his brave brothers left him out of four ; and there were Randolph, Fitzalan, the Frasers, and Lennox, forgetting his age to enjoy to the full the scene before him ; Hay and others of equal note, and Douglas, despite his swarthy complexion and irregular features, possessing such winning courtesy, such chivalric ease and grace of mien, as universally to bear away the palm of gallantry in such a scene, even as on a field of war ; and 'mid these manly forms glided, like spirits of light and air, the graceful figures of the gentler sex, with soft cheeks blushing beneath the consciousness of their own beauty,

eyes veiled 'neath their long lashes, and stealing but timid glances, up to those with whom they traced the mazy dance, or loitered listening to tales of knightly lore.

"Wherefore join ye not the dance, my Lord of Douglas!" demanded the Lady Isoline, to whom the king had in jest abdicated his seat of state upon the dais, and who of a truth filled it as if she had been born and bred a queen. Many a youthful cavalier had gathered round her, seeking her smile, yet Douglas was now there almost alone. "Wherefore join ye not the dance?" she said; "I have seen the *devoir* of a son of chivalry most perfectly performed in all save this. Let not these gay hours passed unenjoyed."

"Nay, they are but too happily detained," he answered; "gentle lady, they were indeed joyless passed other than by thy side."

"Nay, my good lord, in yon fair crowd methinks there are many would give dearer reward for your chivalric homage than ever can Isoline."

"Dearer reward — that, lady, cannot be," replied the knight, in a lower tone, and refusing to discover any meaning in her words, farther than the hour's *badinage*. "Knowest thou not the smile that hardly won is far more precious than that willingly bestowed?"

"A woman's mood, my lord, is a most weary study; and be assured, the walls of thine own fortress are more easily won than a smile withheld. Ah, by the way, there was some tale of that redoubted castle, which, like the phoenix, is ever rising from the ashes in which your prowess hurls it. I would fain hear from your own lips, for I believe not all they tell me; it was unlike my lord of Douglas."

"What do they tell?" demanded the knight, with something like fierce impatience. "What dare they tell *thee* false of me?"

"Nay, an thou speakest thus, I've done, for of a truth my news brook not such outbreaks."

"I pray thee, then, be merciful, most noble lady," answered Douglas, his fiery spirit controlled on the instant beneath her glance.

"I have been merciful already, as thou shalt hear. It was Sir John Wilton, from whom thy valour last won thy hereditary castle, was it not?" Douglas bowed; "and it was for

the love of a lady he engaged to hold that terrible fortress a year and a day."

"Even so, gentle lady."

"And it was rumoured you knew this, and yet he fell under your hand."

"And they lied in their teeth who said so!" again fiercely began Douglas.

"Now peace, fiery spirit, I tell thee they rumoured this, but I do not tell thee I believed it."

"You did me but justice, lady, and I thank thee," replied Douglas, with feeling.

"Nay, I should have done a kind friend and noble master in all knightly deeds foul wrong had I thought other," said Isoline, with something less of piquancy than she had yet deigned to speak. "I heeded the rumour no more than the breeze which passed me by, nay, I vowed that it was false, for I knew the Douglas better. Now then, in return for such consideration, tell me how in truth it chanced."

"I would the tale were more worth your kindly hearing," said Douglas, and he spoke with animation, for in the delight of hearing this insinuated praise, he forgot the lady's first pointed words. "It does but tell a deed often told before. I have sworn the home of my fathers should never rest in English hands, while I bear a sword to win it. I heard that again the insulting foe, despite of the ruin, which surrounded it, the danger they well knew that threatened, had dared to build anew the walls, to fortify and put in train for a strong defence; I had heard this, and swore they should rue it, though it so chanced, that being then actively employed in King Robert's service, some months elapsed before I could approach my native districts—"

"Thus rendering your task more perilous," interposed Isoline, "by giving the English sufficient time to fortify and reinforce. Would it not have been wiser to have sought his grace's leave to attack it on the instant?"

"Nay, that was not needed; the rescue of Castle Dangerous was my own business, that which detained me King Robert's, and, of course, of infinitely more importance. At length his grace, hearing how the districts of Teviot were again under terror of the English stationed in the castle, and knowing my vow, dismissed me unasked, with about eighty men, whom I dispersed in all directions to obtain

intelligence. The news we gained determined my using stratagem rather than a direct attack, for it was said Sir John Wilton—I then knew no more of him than his name—aware of the great peril of his charge, was more strongly and skilfully guarded than either of his predecessors, and was prepared against all covert attacks. His garrison, too, were double the number of my limited force, therefore I deemed it no disgrace to my knighthood to endeavour to lure him to an open field. One of my men, well disguised, penetrated the castle, obtained the hearing of Sir John, and informed him that one of the most noted followers of the Bruce, for whose detention a large reward and much honour was offered by King Edward, lay at a little distance with but eighty men, offering a fair prize for Sir John, as it needed but part of his garrison wholly to subdue them and take their leader prisoner. The bait took ; for Wilton was in truth a gallant soldier, and at first spoke of sallying from the castle with but the same number of men, that we might meet man to man, but my trusty follower believing that so few would be but playwork for his master, advised Wilton to take with him a hundred and twenty, or at least a hundred men."

"For which deed the Douglas no doubt was grateful, as it gave him increase of glory," interrupted the lady ; "I never yet knew him content with an equal combat. I am glad I ventured to absolve you ere I knew your stratagem was no unknighly one."

"Save, lady, that Sir John, though truly informed as to numbers, came forth for our capture, believing us unprepared, whereas we met him in close compact and gallant array—the banner of Douglas and its lord at their head—ready, which at a moment's glance he must have perceived, to do battle not unto death but for the castle. Could my vow have been performed, the fortress gained more openly, I had forsworn stratagem, even such as this."

"Nay, there was little in this, methinks, which the laws of chivalry could condemn, my lord," said Isoline, somewhat kindly. "Well, then, ye fought, and this English knight fell ; and how was it ye knew the tale respecting him ?"

"We did fight, lady, and gallantly, believe me, for Wilton, conscious too late of his own imprudence in being thus decoyed, fought like a lion to redeem his error, and to

endeavour to make good a retreat into the fortress. Even as he fought, it struck me that there was something more than common in his gallantry, eluding every attempt we made for his capture; he literally rushed on death and found it. The field once our own, the castle speedily and almost without a summons opened its gates, and its remaining officers and men surrendered. On bearing the body of the young knight to the castle, and stripping it of the armour, hoping there might be yet signs of life, a letter dropped from his vest, which had evidently rested on his heart, its contents dictated by a loving heart, trembling for the fate of him to whom it was addressed, while it yet animated him to persevere, as his gallant courage bound him yet closer to her, first aroused my attention, and I demanded of my prisoners what it meant. Sir Piers de Monthemar, who had remained almost in a stupor of grief over the body, started up at my question, and with fierce invectives gave me the tale I asked, and which you, lady, already know. It wanted but a brief month to the appointed time, and God wot, had but the faintest rumour of this engagement reached me, stern, ruthless, as they deem me, Douglas had left his father's halls in the hands of the Sassenach, rather than have done this. They knew me not who said I knew this, and yet slew him; perchance they deem the Douglas hath no heart, no sympathy with those that love."

"Nay, take not my idle words so much to heart, gallant knight," said Isoline, gaily, for true to her inward resolve to give her visibly-devoted cavalier no encouragement, she dared not evince the feeling which the fate of the unfortunate Wilson excited: "I tell thee I held them as nought, and for these kindly-disposed retailers of men's deeds, nay, of his thoughts too, why, perchance they deem the gallant Douglas far, far too wise to have aught in common with poor sorry fools that love."

"Nay, lady, I do beseech thee, speak not, think not thus," earnestly entreated the knight, in a lower tone; "fame, glory, chivalry itself, untouched by love, were like the world without its sun. Thou hast done thy poor knight justice in this deed, believe not, then, he scoffs at love."

"Pardon me, my lord, perchance I should deem him wiser did he hold it nought," answered the lady, more gravely; "believe a woman's word, 'tis all too vain and void

and distant for a noble knight like thee. But hast thou no more of the unhappy Wilton to tell me?" she added, quickly changing her tone and subject; "thou didst digress ere their tale was done. Didst hear aught of his lady love? Methinks had she borne him real affection, she did unwisely to test his courage thus."

"Unwisely, perchance; yet surely he that could refuse such a test of love were undeserving of the offered prize. I have often regretted that aught of the lady I could never learn."

"And what did your lordship with your prisoners—sympathising as thou didst with Wilton, I should judge thou wert somewhat less than usually severe?"

"Forgot for once the interests of his country and king, aye, and his own," interposed King Robert, gaily, for it was always a satisfaction to him to perceive his favourite warrior and much-loved niece in amicable conversation, and he had approached them just in time to hear and answer Isoline more fully than Douglas would have done. "Gave them all freedom without ransom; sent them, with fair speeches and true knightly courtesy, back to their own land, without even demanding the condition that they would no more draw sword against Scotland. Did he not more courteously than wisely, my fair niece?"

"He did as King Robert would have done, my liege, and therefore did not courteously alone, but well and wisely, aye, and nobly," and either forgetting her resolve, or really from her approval of the deed, Isoline turned towards him, every feature beaming with such a full and heartfelt smile, that every pulse of the warrior throbbed, and he bowed his head in acknowledgement, without the power of uttering one word.

"Loves our fair niece her seat of state so well, that she is loath to quit it even for the dance?" said the king, smiling. "Is it not something strange to see Isoline so idle?"

"Nay, my liege, it was more befitting Isoline, as representative of majesty, to sit it queenly, and call her subjects round her to list their deeds, than mingle with them in the dance; that, good my lord, were all too great an honour. Thinks not your grace with me?"

"I were no knight could I think otherwise," replied the

king, fondly laying his hand on the rich, dark chestnut hair, whose only ornament was a natural wreath of the delicate bluebell and mountain heath.

With a light and playful smile Isoline bent gracefully to her sovereign, who, with true knightly courtesy had raised her small, white hand to his lips. The eye of the maiden at that instant rested on the figure of Sir Amiot of the Branch, who, leaning against one of the supporting pillars of the tent, appeared intently observing her.

For the first time since he had joined the Bruce he had thrown aside his armour, but the suit he wore, though of rich material, was as sombre as his more warlike habiliments. Doublet, hose, and the short, graceful mantle were of sable velvet, slashed with pale grey satin, while the latter was richly lined with sable fur; his collar was of the most exquisitely fine and whitest linen, but perfectly plain, giving no evidence that gentle hands had been employed in its embroidery, as was the custom in those days. A plain silver clasp secured it at his throat, and the only ornaments on his mantle were his armorial bearings, and their melancholy tale, "*Ni nom ni paren, je suis seul*," worked in silver on the shoulder. He still wore the demi mask, which permitted the exposure of mouth and chin, and round the former, as Isoline first caught his glance, a kind of half-sad, half-unconscious smile was playing. His hair, which seemed very thick and long, had been evidently arranged with the utmost care, and a quantity of glossy raven curls fell on either side, rather lower than his throat, behind, but in front only so as completely to shade his cheek.

"And what said these gallant knights?—told they your highness of their brave deeds in England?" inquired the king, with an affectation of homage to his fair niece, which sat well upon him.

"Truly, yes; they gave fair tidings, goodly proofs that Scottish knights are of true mettle still—for the Lord James of Douglas, methinks his name will become a terror to the English, even as that of the valiant Richard to the Saracens of yore. How is it you alone have failed in duty, youthful sir?" she added, suddenly addressing the cavalier of the mask, with a tone and manner of such peculiar sweetness that he well-nigh started. "Must I impeach you of unknightly disaffection and deem you most disloyal?"

"Sir Amiot, what hast thou done?" rejoined Robert, laughing, though a slight and scarcely perceptible shade gathered for the moment on the brow of Douglas, who, though at times conversing with the knights and maidens who passed him, still stood by the side of Isoline, listening to her words as if they were too precious to be lost even when not addressed to himself.

"Unknightly disaffection, disloyalty! these are heavy charges, sir knight, and from a lady," continued the king. "Pray you, haste to answer them, for an thou art as faithful a subject to the present occupant of this royal seat as gallant soldier to the Bruce, thou art all too valuable to be lightly lost."

"We ask you then, fair sir," said Isoline, cheerfully, following the king's words, "and in all charity, for we hold your knighthood in good favour, wherefore, when other gallant knights and noble gentlemen approached this throne to do us homage and report their knightly deeds, seeking reward we are willing to bestow, you alone, of this goodly company, have kept aloof, seemingly disdainful of our power? Call ye not this disloyal, and most unknightly disaffection?"

"Even so it seemeth, gracious madam," replied the knight, entering into the spirit of her words, and bending his knee with humility far more real than affected, though to those who stood around it seemed but the latter; "yet though I fear me I can make but weak defence, I do most utterly deny the charge. I knew not, lady, that the same honour, the same knightly courtesy awaited the nameless adventurer as these noble knights of stainless names and high distinguished race, else had I been amid the first to pay my homage and report my humble deed; I knew not this, and kept aloof, though my will indeed had brought me here."

"Nay, an thou puttest so much of earnest in thy tone, sir knight, we must have done, extending the sceptre of mercy, though in truth not half convinced. Hath thy knighthood passed so unregarded by King Robert, we would yet ask, that thou dost still feel it needs a name?"

"Pardon me, lady, but to King Robert I am a soldier and a subject, whose truth and worth need proof, and scarce a name; thou, lady, a high and noble maiden, me-

thought, perchance, had demanded more, and I came not, lest it seemed mine homage nearer presumption more than duty."

"Truly, my gallant knight speaks well," said the king, nodding approvingly; "thou must forgive his seeming lack of homage, sweet Isoline, be it but for my sake."

"Nay, my good liege, willing as we would be to do thy will, Sir Amiot's defence absolves himself. Sir knight, thou art excused; we hold thee faithful subject, and would our favour possessed sufficient power to chase all sadness from thy heart."

"And now, sir, that ye have satisfied the Lady Isoline, be kind enough to satisfy me," began Douglas, half jest, half earnest, his secret feelings inclined perhaps far more to the latter than the former. "By what right, an you feared the Lady Isoline too much to do her homage, wear you those flowers?"

"By what right, my lord?" replied the young knight, glancing at a very small bunch of bluebells and heath which he wore; "by that right which Nature gives all her votaries. I sought her shrine, and plucked them; her grasp was not so firm as to deny my wish."

"And knowest thou not, an thou fearest so much the charge of presumption, the wearing them is a bold challenge to all knights and gentles, proclaiming the Lady Isoline's favour is all thine own?"

"What, for proving his taste in Nature's jewels is as undeniable as mine own? Now, shame on thee, Douglas, for the charge!" interposed the lady, gaily. "Thou art over-careful of our favour, sir; yet an thou deemest yon lonely cavalier too highly honoured, even by the permission to wear his own culled flowers, there are buds enow, for all who choose to take them and dub themselves my knights."

She removed the rich wreath from her beautiful hair as she spoke, and unloosing its lightly-twined stalks, replaced a few in a gracefully-falling bunch on one side of her head, and threw the remainder a few paces from her, smiling with an expression of the most mischievous archness, as the young knights, Lord Douglas amongst the first, eagerly darted forward to possess themselves of the coveted prize. For one moment, however, her smile betrayed a deeper

feeling, for she saw Sir Amiot quickly and silently, as if fearful of observation, bend down to raise a tiny sprig of purple heath, which had fallen close at his feet, and hide it in his vest. Whether the perceiving this action occasioned this deeper smile we know not, and Isoline herself, determined there should be no cessation in her merry raillery, again addressed the masked knight.

"Tell me, Sir Amiot, how fared ye in the late expedition? our royal uncle reports marvels of your prowess, and for ourself," her voice, though her words were still jest, thrilled in its sweetness on her listener's heart, "we would know if thy vow be any the nearer its completion. Hast heard aught, discovered aught of the prisoner you seek?"

"Alas! no, lady; I scarce had dared to hope it, yet when again on Scottish ground my heart sunk lower, as if hope had been there, although I knew it not. I must still strive, still struggle, aye, and hope, despite her falsity, that even if my sword fail in the actual deed of liberation, yet when the King of Scotland may demand at Edward's hands the restoration of every Scottish prisoner by him detained in exile, his lip, King Robert's lip, may free me of my vow. Merciful heaven! who, what is that—wherefore looks she thus—how came she here?" he exclaimed, extreme and startling agitation both of voice and manner suddenly usurping the place of his former sad, collected tones, and he hurried question after question, as if terrified at the sound of his own voice. Alarmed and astonished, Isoline hastily turned in the direction of his hand, and though the object on which he gazed was no strange one to her, that it could cause him such extraordinary emotion not a little increased the mystery around him.

It was the figure of a female, seemingly, from the ariel lightness of the peculiarly delicate and tiny form, the exquisite beauty of every feature, which were all cast in the same minute mould, the wild mirth which at that instant was visible round her lip and in her eye, one in the very first stage of life, whose only dream was joy. But this was but the fancy of the first glance; the next, and the heart sunk back appalled, for there was a light in those deep blue eyes, a continual changing of expression, from the

height of glee to the darkest depths of misery, round the beautiful mouth, an absence of all glow on the softly-rounded cheek, which seemed to whisper that the mind that lovely shell contained was gone, and yet there was a something round her, even as it proclaimed the loss of mind, that it had existed, it was a *wreck* and not a *void* on which they gazed—and yet, how could this be? so young, so beautiful she seemed. How could she have known, encountered misery sufficient for this fatal ill? What could have wrecked the mind, if indeed there had been a time when its light illumined its beauteous dwelling—oh, who might answer?

She had come within that gorgeous tent unseen, at first unheard, and when that low, musical laugh of momentary glee betrayed her, the gay crowd paused and turned to look upon her, with spirits chilled in their mirth; sympathy, reverence, aye, something near akin to awe, the rudest amongst them ever felt, when, like a spirit of another sphere, she stood amongst them, for they knew the storm which had caused that wreck; the bolt which had fallen on that brain and heart, and buried all of mind and life beneath its desolation. As Isoline, attracted by Sir Amiot's emotion, met the glance of the afflicted girl, who stood with her long, wavy hair gleaming as pale gold, falling well-nigh to her knees, forming a natural mantle around the pale blue robe she wore, after the first moment of astonishment, remembering it had so chanced that Sir Amiot had certainly never beheld, and perhaps never been aware of the existence of such a being before, she accounted for his agitation by the effect that her sudden presence generally produced, an effect likely to be more startling to a mind sensitive, nay, almost morbid, as she believed Sir Amiot's, than even upon others. But all expression of mirth passed from the Lady Isoline's features as she beheld her, when again she turned to answer the knight; there was a sadness, a depth and capability of feeling in her large, dark eyes, which a minute before had seemed well-nigh incompatible with their sparkling mirth.

"It is Agnes, the only daughter, perhaps now I should say the only child of the Countess of Buchan, and the unfortunate bride and, alas! widow of my noble, my murdered

kinsman, Nigel. Hast thou not heard her tale? perchance not, for the memory of that which has made her thus is fraught with such agony to the king, men seldom speak it but in whispers. Alas! its terrible truth would never pass from his mind, even if that lovely being did not so continually and so fearfully recall it."

"Made her thus!—what mean you?" answered the knight, still painfully agitated.

"Canst thou not see? yet perchance no; to a stranger's eyes that loveliness seems too perfect for the total wreck of mind."

"God in Heaven! mean you the mind—the beautiful, the gifted mind, the loving heart, the gentle spirit?" He checked himself abruptly, for Isoline's glance rested on him in utter bewilderment, and added, in tones struggling for calmness, "Mean you the mind has gone?"

"Alas! 'tis even so."

The knight struggled, but in vain, to suppress a smothered groan.

"How—wherefore—why have I not seen her, known it before?" fell in stifled and disjointed sentences from his lips.

"'Tis a tale of sorrow," replied Isoline; "and yet I marvel thou hast not heard it."

"I knew only she was engaged to the youngest brother of the Bruce, the noble Nigel, whom in former years I knew and loved, and would have died to save; but thou sayest the bride, and widow—were they married?"

"Yes, the Abbot of Scone united them—at the altar's foot their vows were pledged; the whole ceremony completed, when that fearful conflagration took place by which the castle of Kildrummie was won by the English, and of which you must have heard."

"Ignited by treachery within the fortress, was it not?" demanded Sir Amiot, compelling himself to speak, that he might conceal the emotion with which he listened to the tale.

"It was. Sir Nigel rushed from the side of Agnes to struggle even unto death. From nightfall to noon the following day the desperate strife continued, with little intermission. He was taken prisoner by an accident causing his foot to slip, the particulars of which you may hear else—

where, and he never saw his Agnes again till just before the Earl of Hereford set off on his march to England, when she rejoined him in the disguise of a page ; a disguise, it appears, so complete, that at the first moment even Nigel did not know her."

"And she stayed with him, followed him. Heroic, devoted being! how little did we dream thou couldst have done this—but pardon me, lady, I pray you proceed."

"She did follow him, in the vague hope that through the influence of the Princess Joan, whom she sought—travelling alone, and almost all the way on foot from Berwick to Carlisle for the purpose—she might obtain the ear of Edward and supplicate his mercy. She heard the tyrant swear his death, that the warrant had gone, and only recovered from a succession of fainting fits, to return to the prison of her husband, with whom she remained till they came to prepare him for the scaffold. The Earl of Gloucester hoped to have borne her from the tower before the crowds had collected, but, from unavoidable detention, they became so impeded and surrounded that retreat was impossible, and the wretched girl witnessed all, all which a tyrant's cruelty inflicted on her husband."

An exclamation of horror burst from Sir Amiot, but still he signed to Isoline to proceed.

"Still she sunk not, although her only thought seemed the desire to repeat my murdered kinsman's last words to the king ; the mind indeed seemed wandering, but not utterly a wreck. Under charge of old Dermid, the seer and minstrel of our house, from whom I heard this painful tale, she proceeded to Scotland, her aged conductor harassed by the most fearful anxiety lest the Earl of Buchan, who had discovered his daughter in the supposed page, and who had sworn she should bitterly rue her union with a Bruce, should track their wanderings, and, by obtaining possession of her person, throw the last drop of gall in her already bitter cup. He heard that he was close at hand, by some remarks he had caught in their last halting-place, believed their persons were known, and all was lost ; still he proceeded, but was at length compelled, by the increasing exhaustion of Agnes and the advance of night, to seek shelter in a lonely house lying in the thickest part of the woods of Carrick. There

for a few brief hours he believed they were safe, when the quickly-excited ear of the poor girl caught the trampling of horse, and though she was not sensible of the danger which in reality threatened her, it appeared to excite her in no common degree. Dermid has told me the agony of that moment was to him as a whole life of suffering, for no thought was in his mind save of the tyrant earl. Judge, then, his relief, his joy, when instead of the dreaded figure of Buchan, King Robert himself entered the room, and Agnes recognised him at once, though the effort to *spea*k the words which pressed like molten lead on her heart and brain were utterly useless, and laid her senseless at his feet."

"But were they spoken?" murmured the knight, his voice well-nigh suffocated.

"Yes, after a long, long interval of utter unconsciousness. The agony of the king, on learning from Dermid all that had chanced, that the brother he absolutely idolized, till he seemed to feel him brother, son, and friend in one, had fallen in *his* cause and by the hangman's cord—agony no words can describe; for that noble spirit seemed bowed, crushed to the very earth beneath it, and his every effort vain to rouse it. The sight of him, his grief, appeared to rouse Agnes for the time, and with tearless eyes and unflinching voice she repeated, word for word, all that Nigel had spoken the last night they spent together. Not alone his message to the king, but his impassioned dreams, his prophetic visions for the future welfare of Scotland and success of her king, his own joy in death for them, his fervid hopes for and belief in that world on whose threshold he stood—rapidly as one impelled she spoke; but there was no change in the low almost unearthly voice, no quivering in the eye, no glow in the death-like cheek, and when she ceased, voice, consciousness, and life itself seemed to depart, and for three years she thus remained. But for the wandering eye, the low, fearful whisper which had no meaning, the sigh that often burst from her breast, unconsciously—for she would start and look round as marvelling whence it came—it seemed as if existence itself had departed, that she lived not; and yet, oh, it was not the blessed calm, the joy of death, which all who loved her prayed might be her portion."

"But where was she these three years? and how, oh how

came she as she is now?" inquired Sir Amiot, strangely moved.

"You shall hear. My royal uncle, whose devoted love for his murdered brother seemed now divided between his memory and this poor unhappy girl who had *so* loved him, could not at first bear the idea of parting from her, wishing himself to watch over, tend her, as Nigel's last words had implored him to do, and as his own heart prompted, but becoming at last convinced by my mother's advice, that it was far better she should be left in some safe and kindly keeping till his affairs were more prosperous, placed her in charge of the Abbess of St. Clair, superior of a convent among the mountains and lakes of Inverness, and an aged and faithful kinswoman of our own. There, from time to time, the king and some of us have visited her, but until nearly two years ago there was no sign of change either of mind or body. Had maternal kindness been of aught avail, the abbess's gentle care and love would long ere then have been successful, but, alas! the disease was too deeply rooted; and my uncle's anguish was so fearfully renewed every time he beheld her, that at last, for his sake as well as hers, we felt death would be indeed a blessing. Look at him now, and if thou deemest the expression of that noble face—even now is pain, think what it must have been formerly, when I tell thee the feeling with which he looks upon her now is absolutely joy, compared to what it has been."

Sir Amiot followed her glance. On the first appearance of Agnes within the tent, King Robert had quitted the side of his niece and hastened towards her, and he now stood with his arm round her slender waist, his head bent down caressingly, as her sweet colourless face was turned up to his, her two hands resting clasped on his bosom, and a faint smile beaming in her eyes and round her lip, giving both face and attitude the semblance of a child, whose only consciousness was love and confidence in him against whose heart she leaned. There was deep, touching sadness on the monarch's face, despite the smile with which he sought to answer her; sadness that confirmed, at a momentary glance, the words of Isoline. Sir Amiot read all a brother's love, all the harrowing memories of the past which that face conjured up, and he read, too, how devotedly, how even

as a father the sovereign looked on her and cherished, fostered, aye, and grieved over that awful affliction, as if in very truth she was his own, own child. Where was the warrior, as he thus bent over her? Where the triumphant sovereign, the glorious saviour of his land? Vainly might these things have then been sought; he stood and seemed but the mourning father of an afflicted, but from that very affliction an idolized child.

Sir Amiot gazed, and there was such a gush of grief upon his heart, such a wild torrent of impetuous feeling sweeping over his spirit, threatening, and he gave it not vent, to crush him to the earth, that the whole scene danced before his eyes, the very lights grew dim; he saw nought but a well-remembered chamber far, far away from that spot, and that face, that sweet face, not as it was now, and another answering to the endearing name of "mother!" from that fair girl, and from——And what was it he longed to do? to clasp that lovely being to his throbbing heart, to fling himself before King Robert, and swear yet deeper, dearer homage, for oh, he had but dreamed he loved the king before, now only was it that he felt its depth. Well it was that mask in part concealed his features, the convulsed lip, and starting eye indeed could scarcely be concealed; but by those around him such emotion was easily attributable to the sad tale he heard, repeated as it was in such thrilling tones of sympathy by the beautiful, the gifted Isoline.

"And the change we see, how came it?" at length he asked, though the effort to speak calmly caused his very brain to reel.

"How it came indeed none may know, but gradually it took place, so gradually, that indeed the final change seemed to startle by its suddenness. Rather less than two years since she became so alarmingly ill, that the abbess sent for the king, imagining that the last change was taking place, and the beautiful spirit about to be released, but we were all mistaken, she recovered; with a suddenness that seemed unnatural, and from that hour has been as thou seest now, even as a child, save that, alas! there was no awakening intellect, nought that may promise the summer shall be beautiful as the spring, the flower as the bud."

"Hath she no memory of the past? no feeling of the present?" inquired the knight.

"There are moments, when it would seem the memories of the past occasion paroxysms of agony, although the actual cause of that agony appears undefined; she speaks as if continually expecting a beloved one, looking for his return from distant lands or worlds it may be, anticipating his summons, and then sinking into despondency that it is so long delayed. For the present, her strongest feeling is affection—clinging, caressing, confiding as a child's for a parent—for the person of the king; from the moment she recovered from the sudden illness I mentioned, and the present change took place, this feeling appeared to take possession of her. She will sit for hours in his tent, on a low seat by his side, her hands on his knee, and looking up in his face, as thou sawest just now, seldom speaking, seemingly quite contented to be near him, and when compelled to be separated, as during his last expedition into England, she yielded indeed because he besought her to remain with my mother and myself till his return; but she wept when he was gone, and would not be comforted."

"And can you account for this affection, lady?"

"Some believe it to have risen simply from his love for her, which, despite her affliction, she is quite conscious of; for myself, I believe there is yet another and more powerful cause. I have always fancied a strong family likeness existed between the king and my kinsman Nigel."

"And you imagine she too perceives this, and is drawn closer to him, though she herself could not tell you why? it is likely, very likely," interposed the knight.

"I do think so, and more, that in the faint shadowy outlines which her mind bears of the past, there are still some dim associations connected with him as King of Scotland, which combine to draw that link closer. I have thought this still more strongly from observing her, when he is about to join any battle, or expects any meeting with the foe; a spirit almost of prophecy comes upon her, and she dismisses all thought of defeat, as a thing impossible, repeating the last inspiring words of her husband, as if she felt and believed them the voice of heaven granted to herself."

"And does she ever say who originally spoke them? ever at such times allude to him?"

"Not in actual words? but it is ever after such a spirit of prophecy has come upon her that the paroxysm of agony

returns, as if a black shapeless mass of memories arose before her, all of woe, but not one distinct."

"Is there none other whom she affects besides the king? It is strange, clinging to him as you describe, I have never seen her until now."

"Hardly strange, Sir Amiot, for the year you were close by the person of my royal uncle she had not joined us; until the king held a temporary court at Dumbarton, you were generally with my uncle Edward or Lord Douglas, and at court she was kept apart from all, save ourselves, the king could not bear her affliction to be seen and cavilled on. During the retreat to the north, and the late expedition, she was with my mother, myself, and others, in the convent of St. Clare. That she is more susceptible of feeling, of passing emotion, than during the first three years of her affliction, I quite believe, but I know not if she affects any one very particular, with the sole exception of the king; and latterly, perchance, myself."

"Thee—doth she love thee, sweet lady?" interrupted her companion, with startling earnestness, then hastily checking himself, added more calmly, "no marvel that she should, thou, who art kind to all, would show yet double kindness to that poor afflicted one, and wrecked as is the spirit, it may be conscious yet of that; thou art, thou wilt be kind to her," he added almost unconsciously.

"I were indeed no woman, were I not," answered Isoline, controlling her surprise. "I loved her when but a child I seemed to her, and now, in her affliction, oh, she is doubly dear."

She broke off somewhat abruptly, and perceiving the eyes of Agnes wander, as in search of some one, hastily advanced towards her, and urged by an irresistible influence, Sir Amiot followed.

"Sweet one, thou hast shunned me, I have come to chide," said Isoline, softly, as Agnes laid her hand on hers, and looked up in her face without speaking. "Wherefore linger in this one spot so long? 'tis a gay and pleasant scene, mine Agnes."

"He was here, they told me so: I came to him," was the answer, to catch which Sir Amiot had bent forward, and the voice that spake it was of a wild and thrilling sweetness, as the carol of a bird.

"And was there none else you sought? shame, shame on you, dear girl!"

"Oh yes, there is one I always seek, but he will not come to me here. I do not hear his whisper, it is too soft, too sweet to pierce through tones as these—he is floating above me in the blue and shapeless space, and he has his golden harp slung round his neck, and he draws forth such loving lingering tones; oh, they will not sound here, it is too narrow, too confined, I cannot hear them, cannot see him now. When, when will he come for me? he smiles so often on me, aye, and seems to beckon. When shall I go to him? why cannot I go now?" and Isoline drew her closer to her heart in silence, for the dark cloud had come upon her brow, it passed, and again she spoke. "Why wear ye these flowers, Isoline? I love to say your name, it is so sweet. But why wear these? oh, they are such sorrowful flowers."

"Sorrowful, dearest, wherefore? Is not the bluebell our own hale Scottish flower, and the mountain heath too its own true emblem."

"The heath—call ye this heath? Oh yes, I have plucked it on the mountain and the glen, and woven bright garlands to woo back my own truant love, and chain him by my side, and he has hovered over me and smiled, but he might not come. I love that flower, it is free and fresh, and true, like him; but these, these," she pointed tremblingly to the bluebells, "oh, they are no buds for love; he plucked them for me once, and they withered as I touched them, and lay dead and faded, and they told what my heart would be, and I would not have thine like it, sweet Isoline; for though I smile, oh, it feels such a strange smile, it seems as if I had other smiles once, but I know not when, and my heart throbs as if it were not always withered as it is now, and those flowers always speak mournfully, but they look too fresh, too bright, for a gift of love."

"They were no gift of love, sweet one; my own hand plucked them from the dewy grass."

"Ah, then they will not die yet; but do not take them from a hand of love, Isoline, they will part you from joy as they do me. Oh, I see him sometimes so near me, I feel as if I could spring to his arms, and then, oh, a flowery chain divides us, they fall at my feet and then he is gone."

"Are they indeed so ill omened?" fell from Sir Amiot's

lips, in a low yet distinct voice, as he looked a moment from the form of Agnes to the flowers he wore. She started at his voice, raising her head from the bosom of Isoline, and passed her hand across her brow, while for the space of a minute the countenance so varied in expression as to cause both the king and Isoline to look at her in alarm.

"Who spoke?" she asked at length, in a voice so changed that it seemed almost the voice of awakened consciousness; "who spoke?"

"It was I, lady," answered the knight, and lifting up his face to hers, so that the full and tearful glance of his dark eyes met hers.

"A gallant soldier, sweet one!" continued the king, perceiving that the troubled expression continued, and dreading a recurrence of those paroxysms to which Isoline had alluded, and which often came, excited from little or no cause; "one whom I hold in high favour; thou dost not know him, love."

Again she passed her hand over her brow, the shade deepened a moment, a convulsive motion quivered round the lip, and glazed the eye wildly on his; but then as suddenly it relaxed, the eye resumed its varying light, the features their unsettled yet softened play, and a low, musical laugh escaped her.

"It was a wild fancy, sweet Isoline. I dream sometimes of such strange things, and they come with such pain, too, here and here," she placed her hand alternately on her heart and head; "but I am not in pain now; it did not last long this time. And what was it brought it—do you know?"

"Was it the voice of a stranger, dearest?"

"A stranger? it might be, but it was not *his*. Oh, no, no! it is only when I am alone he speaks to me, and tells me how much he loves me still, though he cannot come to me yet. But some other voice came to me then. Methought I was a child again, and such bright forms fled by me, flashing out of such deep darkness; but they are all gone, all gone now," and with the swiftness of thought she threw her arms round the neck of Isoline, and wept like an infant.

"Come with me, mine own love; we will go forth a brief while and look out upon the night; thou lovest to gaze upon the stars, sweet Anges. Wilt thou come?"

"Yes, yes! it is silent, holy there. Oh, I cannot bear these sounds; a moment since I loved them, but they are too harsh, too mournful now."

Sir Amiot hastily and silently stepped aside for them to pass; and strange was it that when the eye of Lord Douglas rested with increased reverence and love on the lovely form of Isoline, always majestic, always noble, but at that moment, as she tenderly supported the bending form of her afflicted friend with all a woman's sympathy—it was strange, we say, that at such a moment Sir Amiot scarcely saw her; that his look which, if seen, would have betrayed impassioned agony, saw but one of those lovely beings, and that was Agnes.

Attended by King Robert, they disappeared behind the curtain of the tent, and for a moment Sir Amiot remained spell-bound where he stood. He was roused by the bluff and gleesome voice of Lord Edward Bruce, demanding wherefore he stood so idle there, when all the laws of chivalry were impeaching him as traitor to the fair. He strove to answer, but his tongue clave to the roof of his mouth, his brain reeled, and there came but an unintelligible sound.

Perceiving such evident suffering, the kind-hearted warrior rallied him no longer, and Sir Amiot controlled himself sufficiently to walk calmly from the tent. He stood a moment beneath the starlight vault of heaven, the fresh breeze playing delightfully on his heated brow; suddenly the mournful accents of the unhappy Agnes fell on his ear again, sweet as he had heard them first. He saw her light form, seeming yet more spirit-like in that vast and beautiful expanse of hill and valley, clothed in the solemn drapery of night, than it had been even in the illuminated tent; and that deep anguish came back upon his soul, heightened by the notes of music floating from within. He darted from the spot, springing over crag and bush, till no sound nor sight of man was near, and then he flung himself upon the glistening grass, and the bold, the brave, the unmoved warrior buried his face in his trembling hands and sobbed aloud.

CHAPTER XXX.

KING ROBERT'S power was fast increasing. Perth was gained, another link in Scotland's chain was broken, yet the desires of the husband and father remained as far from completion as ever. Some prisoners of consequence, indeed, were taken, but none of such importance as to demand the Scottish prisoners for their exchange, and the king and his gallant companions were in consequence compelled to rest content with the heavy ransoms offered by the knights themselves for their release.

Although several soldiers and officers were quartered in the city, and King Robert himself, at the earnest entreaty of the loyal inhabitants, took up his residence for a few days in the Abbey of Black Friars, yet the principal encampment was still without the town, both officers and men preferring the free scope of heaven to the confinement of the city. The king's pavilion was there also erected, and there he speedily returned, as much for the sake of Agnes—who, though she would not leave him, appeared unusually sad in the monastery—as his own. The fit of prophecy had come upon her as usual, when he marched forth with his warriors to the storming of the city, and the crushing agony which followed appeared to have lasted longer than heretofore. On returning to the camp, however, and permitted unrestrainedly to wander where she would, she gradually returned to her usual mood.

Some few weeks after the capture of Perth, the Knight of the Branch found himself, early one lovely morning, roving idly amid the glens and woods on the outskirts of the camp. He had sought them with no particular purpose, save to disperse the feverish sensations both of mind and body, with which a restless night had oppressed him, and therefore found the fresh, springy breeze of October particularly grateful. Absorbed for awhile in his own thoughts, which by his elastic step might be imagined somewhat less sad than usual, the song of the birds, the

rustling of the falling leaves, the silvery murmur of many mountain streams came sweetly harmonized upon his ear, without creating any distinct images, until they were joined by a sweet, thrilling, human voice, which caused him not only to start and pause, but dashed the more pleasing emotions of the scene and hour with inward and outward agitation. It was strange the effect that voice ever had on Sir Amiot, alike when it found him alone or surrounded by his comrades, though in the latter case it was always more carefully and painfully suppressed. On most men, indeed, those tones ever thrilled to the inmost soul, bringing for the moment, even to the rudest soldier, a sensation of pity, almost of awe. They seemed something so unlike the voice of earth, so piercing in their sweetness, even when their words were choked by tears, that they told their tale well-nigh before their speaker was perceived. Sir Amiot ever appeared to start and quiver beneath their spell, as if it were not alone mere sympathy in the sufferer, but that he himself, by some strange magnetic influence, *felt* the pain, the full knowledge of which was lost to her.

Nor was the effect this morning less painful than heretofore; every other thought now became merged in one. He gazed round him hastily and enquiringly, but his vision was bounded by the intricate windings of his woody path, and though the voice had sounded clear, and at no great distance, he could not see the being whom he sought. Again he listened, rapt, entranced, but nought save the voice of Nature at that moment met his ear.

"Was it a dream, a fancy?" he thought; "no, no. Oh, it came upon my heart too painfully for that. Agnes, mine own dear Agnes!"

Another moment, and he stood before the object of his search, and then he suddenly paused, fearing to alarm her. She was seated on a mossy bank, on a wild spot, varied by rock and shrub and flower, overlooking a wild glen beneath. Her wavy hair was uncovered and unconfined; but it was so fine, so golden, that it gave no appearance either of wildness or heaviness to the delicate form and features it shaded; it did but enhance the spirit-like effect with which she ever burst upon the heart and sight. Sir Amiot watched her ere he ventured to approach. The deep blue eye at times rested on the flowers, at others

fixed itself on the fleecy clouds floating above her, with a gaze intent, almost fearful in its love. Then again, with the rapid transitions of disordered intellect, Sir Amiot saw her glance fixed on a bunch of flowers, growing on the summit of a rock near her, and much beyond her reach. Her eye sparkled with sudden glee, and she sprung up as to catch them, but failing, he heard her murmur as a child—

“If he were here, good King Robert, he would get them for his poor Agnes; there is not a thing she wants he will not give her, except one, and that he cannot, for he cannot see my beloved, only I can see him. I would he were here; those flowers would charm my beloved to me, or bear me up to him; he loved flowers, and he smiles on them still.”

She looked wistfully and sadly on them, and Sir Amiot, well-nigh choked by his emotion, lightly and hastily advanced, sprung up the crag, gathered, and, kneeling, laid them at her feet. She caught them with a musical cry of glee, pressed them to her lips, and then to her bosom, and then looked half-wonderingly, half-gaily on the stranger knight.

“Why do you kneel to me, kind stranger! I have no smiles and merry jest with which to thank you as Isoline; yet I am not ungrateful. I would weave you a lovely wreath with them, but that they are promised to another.”

“Agnes!” murmured the knight, with the wild hope that his voice might startle as it had at first, but it did not, for it was almost inarticulate. “Agnes! oh, look on me, am I too unknown?”

He removed the mask; he fixed on her the full-speaking gaze of those large dark eyes; he caught her dress as to detain her, and his hand, unconsciously closed in supplication, but he looked in vain; her eye wandered over his features, with the half-shy, half-admiring gaze of a child, but there was no recognition in its glance.

“Know thee! oh, Agnes does not know any one now but King Robert and Isoline. I see many goodly forms and noble knights pass by, and they look kindly, but they are like figures in a dream; I think I know them, but I do not; and thou, too, sir knight, I only feel thou wert kind to

give me these sweet flowers, and that makes me think I know thee."

"Look on me, look on me!" reiterated the knight, becoming more and more agitated. "Oh! can it be that even to the voice of one who, for sixteen years, shared the same love, the same blessing, who knew not a joy apart from thee—hath *my* voice too faded from thy memory—hath it no echo, no memory of the past?"

"The past!" repeated Agnes; "what mean you by the past? Sometimes I hear men speak of past, of future, but I know not what they mean. Memory—oh, perchance once I had a memory, but it must be a strange, sad thing; for when I *weep* they whisper that 'tis memory."

"And is it not?" asked her companion, endeavouring to control emotion so as to follow her wandering thoughts, and turn them to the wished-for channel; "wherefore dost thou sorrow else?"

"Oh, no; I do not weep for any cause. Sometimes there comes a sharp, convulsive pain across my brain and heart, and then when it goes I weep, I know not why; and then sometimes I see nothing but such deep, deep darkness, with no shape, no form, and then beautiful shadows arise before me, and I try to clasp and love them, but they go, they pass into the darkness, and then I weep that they are gone."

"And knowest thou these shadows, sweet one—take they no form? Wherefore wouldst thou love them?"

"Because they smile on me; they come upon my heart and nestle there, and then my soul folds her fibres round them, and tries to hold them, and bleeds and quivers when they go; it is strange, for I do not know them—I know not why I love them."

"Have they no voice, no name?" faltered Sir Amiot.

"Once methought I heard them speak, and then, oh, it was so strange, I was in another lordly chamber, and they were round me, and another *too*, but that could not be, for his dwelling is in air—he was too pure and beautiful for earth—he bent down to love me, and called me to him; and I feel sometimes as if he clasped me to his bosom, and pressed his kisses on my cheek, though the mist is round him and hides him from me; and when I would remove that veil, oh, there is nothing—nothing there, he has flown

back again to his viewless home ; he is sailing again on the fleecy clouds."

Her voice sunk into mournfulness, sweet and thrilling, and she resumed her seat on the mossy bank, and drew the flowers round her, and looked awhile on them, then up to the blue heavens, and shook her head murmuring sadly—

"He has gone—gone now ; he only comes when Agnes is alone. Why do you weep, sir knight ? oh, do not weep ; you should be happy, for you are kind and good. Why should you weep ?"

"Say but you love me, though you know me not !" burst from the knight's lips, as in impassioned agony he buried his face in her lap and wept aloud. "Oh, Agnes, Agnes ! the only being near me who might love me, on whom I might pour forth all, all the rushing tide of natural love within me—to find thee thus, even by thee unknown—unloved. No claim on thee, nought that can awake that slumbering intellect, and bid thee love me—me, whom in former years thou didst so love, so cling to ; no joy was perfect unless I might share it—me, who shared thy infant cradle, thy childhood's mirth, thy youth's confiding love ; who knelt with thee to ask a parent's blessing. Agnes, mine own, my beautiful ! oh, look on me, know me, love me, and thou wouldst not see me weep."

"His own, his beautiful," she repeated ; "who speaks such words to me but one ? and oh ! thou art not he." She passed her hand over his features, lingeringly and touchingly gazing on them, and murmuring, "Oh, no, thou art not he ; his hair was richly golden, and thine is black as a raven's wing ; and his eyes were blue, oh, blue as his own native sky, and so soft, so loving, and thine is black and restless ; he is of heaven, and thou of earth. Oh, no, I am not thine, sir knight ; I am his, only his."

"But was there none other that loved thee—none other whom thou didst love ? Look upon me, sweet one. The shadows that come before thee, have they no substance apart from him—have they no form, no semblance that mine may fill ? Oh, speak to me."

"Oh, they are too shadow-like to resemble thee ! there is one, with jetty hair and sparkling eye, but his cheek is soft and rosy as a child, and his step as light, his laugh as joyous ; he has no dream of sorrow, and his voice is full of

mirth—it hath no tones of depth and woe and care like thine: oh, no, they have no likeness upon earth, their land is that of shadows. Do not weep, sir knight; I would love thee if I could. But why dost thou ask me? Ah! poor Agnes hath no spirit now, it hath gone up to my own faithful love, and she would follow it; she hath no home on earth. Why dost thou love me?"

"I had a sister once, and she was like to thee," faltered Sir Amiot, clasping her hands in his, and gazing fearfully in her face. "Agnes, sweet Agnes, let me love thee for her sake. Think, hadst thou a brother, how he would love thee."

"A brother! Do brothers love so dearly? oh, yes, King Robert loved his. See, see, he smiles upon me; he scatters flowers, immortal flowers, to weave the wreath for him. Dost thou not see? oh, no, thou canst not, he only comes to Agnes. I will go gather fresher leaves, and he will hover near then. Do not follow me, kind stranger; he smiles through a mist when any one is by; he speaks to me when no other voice is near, and, hark! he calls me, he beckons me. Oh, I will go—my own love, I come, I come!"

Her eyes were again fixed, with the full, earnest, intense gaze Sir Amiot had seen before; they moved as if following the object which alone they saw, and then she gathered up her flowers, and sprung lightly to her feet, looked once more on vacancy, smiled, and, stretching out her arms, darted lightly from the rocky platform, and disappeared behind some rocks and brushwood on the opposite side.

Sir Amiot remained where she had left him, prostrate on the grass, his head leaning on the seat she had quitted, and buried in his hands, while the convulsive heavings of his chest told how deeply and painfully he was moved. There was a slight rustling among the bushes, a hasty step, but he heard it not, lost in the unutterable bitterness of grief.

Now it so happened that destiny, fate, or chance, by whatever name she chooses to be called, had led the Lady Isoline a ramble that morning, and tempted her to sit down and rest on a rock, out of sight, but within hearing of almost all that had passed between Sir Amiot and Agnes. Almost all, perchance, we should not say, because had it

been so, her conclusions would certainly have been other than they were ; as it was, it was precisely those broken words of Sir Amiot which were the most difficult to be understood that were borne to her unwilling ear, and held her, despite her every effort to pursue her ramble, spell-bound where she sat. Sir Amiot spoke of love, impassioned, fervent love ; he seemed to be alluding to the past, but how she could not catch, and darker and darker did the web of mystery close around him. She had heard the words, "my own, my beautiful," addressed to Agnes, coupled with a wild appeal that she would know and love him, and she could bear no more, and with a desperate effort had turned from the spot, vainly endeavouring to reduce her thoughts to order. Could it be that in an unhappy, an unreturned affection for Agnes of Buchan had originated that deep melancholy which marked the young knight's demeanour ? that would indeed account for his extraordinary agitation at first beholding her, his anguish at hearing of her affliction, and now that she was free, might he not, in the wild unreasonableness of passion, speak to her as she had overheard ? But how, then, did this agree with the tenor of his oath, the rescue of one dearer than life itself ; how could she connect the two ? Thought sprung from thought, till her mind became more painfully bewildered than before.

"Am I not a fool, worse than fool, tormenting myself thus ?" she said, unconsciously thinking aloud. "What is it, what can it be to me ? Why am I sunk so low as to think thus of one who evidently shuns me, fearing, perchance, my favour should bid him forget former and dearer ties ?" And then would she recall the wishes of her uncle the king, that she should favour the suit of Douglas. "Learn to know my gallant soldier," he had said to her, "and thou wilt learn to love him. I tell thee, Isoline, next to the freedom of my country, the liberation of my wife and child, there is nought I so desire as to call James of Douglas by a yet nearer and dearer name than friend ; reward him as his high merits demand, I could not, did I give him half my kingdom. I would indeed it were my daughter that he loved, for even her I would bestow upon him. Then thou who art in truth my daughter in love, as if thou wert in blood, think on the joy it would be to me to confer the happiness he so richly merits by the gift of thee. Do not

believe love only springs to life in a flash ; there is that which riseth slowly through the folds of esteem, and may in some degree be tutored into being. Learn to love the Douglas, my gentle Isoline, and not alone on him wilt thou confer a jewel of imperishable price, but on thine uncle Robert happiness without alloy." And the wishes of the king were echoed in the hearts of her parents, Sir Niel and Lady Campbell ; yet had she loved the Douglas, scarcely would the interview of Sir Amiot and Agnes have occasioned her so much pain.

But we may not linger on the thoughts or feelings of Isoline ; bitter and most painful as they were to her, to our readers, in truth, they would be indefinable. Suffice it, that though wholly unable to reconcile Sir Amiot's manner to herself with the words she had overheard him use to Agnes, she resolved on never permitting herself to waver in the belief that he was either actually betrothed, or that his affections were irrevocably engaged, and that in consequence she herself was perfectly safe, and might talk with him or accept his services just as securely as she could with the Earl of Lennox or Lord Hay. She believed herself to be clothed in the invulnerable armour of indomitable pride, which would no more dream of loving, where there was no love to be had in return, than of loving at the command of another.

No alteration therefore, took place in her manner, either to Sir Amiot, his companions, or Lord Douglas, whose devotion was so sincere, so respectful, yet so unobtruding, that she could find no excuse whatever to banish him from her side ; and there were times, when the restless fancies of her ever-active mind oppressed her almost to pain, she almost wished she could give Douglas the love he desired, and in that feeling find mental rest.

CHAPTER XXXI.

TIME passed swiftly and brilliantly for the patriots of Scotland, who beheld, at the close of every month, unanswerable signs of their all-conquering arms. Castle after castle fell before the king or his leaders ; nay, untaught, undisciplined countrymen, inspired by the same spirit, turned their pruning-hooks into spears, and marching forth on the same errand, unostentatiously yet ably aided Bruce, by subjugating and delivering into his hands the strong castle of Linlithgow and some others. Roxburgh fell before the skill and prowess of Douglas, whose exploits rather increased than lost in brilliancy with every passing year. There was a spirit of love and hope within him, unconsciously infusing his whole being. Latterly, in the brief intervals which his constant absence from court permitted him to spend with the object of his affections, her manner had appeared to him gentler, kinder ; he could not indeed have defined wherefore or why it so seemed, for if he ever ventured to breathe the subject nearest his heart, her words bore the same tendency they ever did, never verging in the smallest degree on encouragement, nay, quite the contrary, and yet, strange constancy, Lord Douglas hoped still. That she could love another never entered his wildest dreams ; in truth, whom could she love ? He knew her well enough to feel assured not one of the gay flatterers around her possessed sufficient attraction to satisfy that heart. Once he might have feared Sir Amiot, but lately even that fear had departed ; they were very seldom together, for like himself, that knight's known and valued prowess seldom permitted his remaining idle in King Robert's court. Douglas was as lowly-minded as he was brave ; but he was not blind to his own merits, to his own superiority to many of his companions, and therefore it was not much marvel, believing the Lady Isoline's affections still free, he should hope in time to gain them.

The end of the year 1312 beheld every Scottish fortress in the hands of King Robert, except two, Edinburgh and

Stirling. For the reduction of the former, the king despatched his nephew Randolph, with a picked band, hoping much from his known skill and bravery, yet scarcely daring to anticipate success from the impregnable fastnesses of nature on which the castle stood. Douglas was at that time engaged in the neighbourhood of Roxburgh, whose fortress he had just reduced; other of the Bruce's leaders were scattered in various parts of Scotland, and the king himself, for the time being, held his court at Dumbarton, and there, with Lady Campbell and her daughter, was the afflicted Agnes, for, as we have noticed, she never now was without increased unhappiness when absent from King Robert's side. Wherever his rapid movements and continued successes called him, there did she find her home, and there her chief delight; and now at Dumbarton, as in the beautiful vicinity of Perth, her sweet voice had lost itself in song, her fair hands had wreathed fresh garlands for her love. Sent thither with dispatches by Randolph, Sir Amiot, on his arrival, was somewhat surprised to perceive the air of disquiet and confusion which appeared to reign among the domestics and soldiery scattered about the outer courts of the castle. To all his enquiries, he could only glean that the English had been in the neighbourhood, committing ravages, making some prisoners, and the king himself had gone forth to follow and chastise them.

Without reply, Sir Amiot, closely followed by his page, hastened on, crossing the inner and outer ballium, over the drawbridge, and was in the act of dismounting, when, cloaked and veiled, attended by some followers, as if returning from beyond the castle walls, the Lady Isoline Campbell hastily advanced, as about to enter within the massy gates. The young knight sprang from his steed in an instant, and was at her side, with a greeting unusually eager, as if the delight of thus meeting her had startled him from his usual reserve. She was evidently surprised, but neither the surprise nor the anxious thought which evidently engrossed her caused her to forget the dignified composure which had lately characterised her manner.

"His grace is well, and will be glad to see you, Sir Amiot," she said, in answer to his interrogatory; "for of a truth he is aggrieved and anxious in no common degree."

"What, then, has chanced? The English—"

"Agnes, our afflicted Agnes, in wandering, as is her wont, has fallen into their power, and the king has followed, hoping to track their course. You are ill, sir knight."

She had not moved her eye from him as she spoke, but even without that penetrating glance, his emotion must have made itself evident; he staggered back as if a dagger's point had reached him, repeating as if to himself—

"Agnes—God in heaven! Agnes, sayest thou? The villains, the merciless villains! could not her innocence, her affliction, have saved her from them? Which way went they? in mercy tell me, lady! Pardon me," he added, struggling to regain composure, "I have startled, alarmed you; but you know not, you cannot know the anguish of this sudden news. She must not, she shall not be left in their hands; she will droop, she will die. And I—how can I save her?"

His voice grew more and more agitated. Isoline would have spoken words of soothing, but the first word betrayed to her own ear such an utter change in her voice, she dared not trust it farther. Sir Amiot's page alone appeared unconcerned.

"My lord, my lord, you have ridden too hard, and are fatigued, or this news would not so unnerve you," he expostulated. "Trust me, the Lady Agnes will speedily be liberated, wherever she may be; there's not a hiding-nook of Scotland I do not know. Pray you, my lord, wait but till his grace returns."

"The boy speaks wisely, Sir Amiot; abide by his counsel," said Isoline, composedly, for the huskiness of voice, whatever might have been its cause, had passed. "Pray you pass in; rest thee till the king returns, perchance he may bring us better cheer."

One glance the knight fixed on the lady; it might have been grateful acknowledgement for her kindly words, it might have been something more, but certainly at this moment it was wholly incomprehensible to her on whom it rested, and consequently elicited no reply. Bowing his head in silent assent, he followed her within the castle to the apartments of the Earl of Lennox, hearing by the way a brief detail from Isoline of the disappearance of Agnes. She had been wandering, as she always loved to do, in the

wildest, most rocky and woody glens in the vicinity of the castle. Not being aware that some bands of English plunderers were hovering about the country, and conscious of the annoyance it always was to her to be sensible that a guard attended her, King Robert had desired the trusty followers who had her in charge to keep at a distance, and not annoy her by showing themselves unnecessarily. Amidst the rocks and woods around the castle it was difficult to obey this charge, and so silently and suddenly had she been captured, that nothing but a faint and, at the moment, unnoticed cry had betrayed the truth. They had sought her in every direction, and the failure of their search had alone recalled that cry, and forced the truth on their minds. The king, half-distracted as to the probable effect of imprisonment and ill-treatment on the afflicted Agnes, had himself headed a gallant band by daybreak that morning, determined on leaving no spot unsought, though, from the innumerable caves and hollows close at hand, Isoline feared, with little chance of success. She herself, unable to remain quietly under the influence of anxiety, had called her personal followers around her, and searched in all the favourite haunts of Agnes, with the vain hope to find some clue to her fate.

"And blessings on thee for the kind thought and kinder deed, sweet lady!" Sir Amiot murmured as she thus spoke. "My poor Agnes cannot thank thee for thy love, but I, oh, would that I—"

He paused abruptly, conscious that in that moment of excitement he was not master of his words, and the solemn vow of years might be insensibly betrayed. The tramping of many chargers on the drawbridge, the sound of the Bruce's clarion at that moment announced the return of the king, and broke the pause of emotion which closed Sir Amiot's broken words.

Isoline darted to a window overlooking the court, with the exclamation—

"She may be with them!" too quickly changing into "Alas! no."

The speedy entrance of King Robert and his followers prevented all suggestion, and quickly gave the information required. Successful it was evident they had not been; but from the English prisoners they had captured, they

learned sure tidings, which, painful as they were, were better than suspense. Agnes was the captive of a marauding band, who, believing her a person of some consequence, had resolved on conveying her to one of the border towers, to demand a heavy ransom; but in which direction the captives could or would not tell. King Robert had returned, determined on collecting his light armed troops, and marching southward without delay. Sir Amiot's inclination led him to beseech permission to accompany his sovereign, instead of returning to his post in the camp of Randolph; but the latter was a station of so much more danger and honour than the former, that, though the effort was a violent one, he controlled himself, and gave no evidence of desiring other employment than that with which he was charged. Another imperative reason urged this resolution. As his mysterious agitation calmed, he became aware that any such violent demonstration of anxiety as to the fate of Agnes was exposing him very naturally to remarks which he could not answer, drawing upon him yet further notice, and, perchance, exposing him to suspicions which were far better averted than encouraged. He was thankful that it had been from the lips of Isoline the startling intelligence had been first received. He little dreamed the effect of *his* emotion upon her. Calmly, then, and seemingly evincing no more interest in the present subject than the other leaders, he listened to the reports they brought; true, his heart throbbed with sickening anxiety, for much as she was loved and pitied in all King Robert's camp and court, none, not even the king himself, felt for her as Amiot. Calmly he presented his dispatches, held a long private conference with the king, received his commands, and as calmly took his leave, resting a few hours, and starting at the earliest dawn once more for Edinburgh. He wished much for one parting look, one parting word from the Lady Isoline, if it were but to repeat his thanks for the tenderness she ever evinced for Agnes, and to beseech her for some message of relief if the afflicted were indeed restored.

"Yet wherefore," he internally said, as with a sad and heavy heart he rode on some yards ahead of his followers, "wherefore thus speak, when to her, as to all others, my sympathy in my poor Agnes must remain secret as the

grave? why do I so continually forget that she knows no more of me and mine than others? Alas! it is my wish that speaks and not my reason. Even were all of mystery removed, might I but step forward in my own person, my own name, how dare I hope? Would the Bruce consent to her union with one of a traitor race, mingle his pure blood with the black discoloured stream that runs through me—would even my mother's merits, her truth, her loyalty, her worth, weigh in such a cause? Alas, alas! better to die, die as my country's soldier, than live as now, nameless, birthless, or if name and birth revealed, both, both a traitor's; revealed, perchance but to be mistrusted by the king, who loves me now; shunned by her, at whose faintest glance my heart springs up, as if it knew not life save then—can it be otherwise? What is one arm, one heart amid a race of a thousand traitors? Will Robert trust *one* as true, amidst a thousand false? Oh, better to die unknown, better to die, when, as his gallant soldier, he may weep for me! Why has not death found me? I have not shunned it." Darker and darker, for a brief interval, grew his thoughts, but then there came a sudden flash upon them, dispersing their turbid stream; he lifted his head, which had sunk upon his breast, he suddenly clasped his hands, in the enthusiasm of that moment's thought, and murmured, "No, no, I may not wish to die till that I seek is done. Mother, beloved, revered, pardon thy son, that for one brief moment thou wert forgotten, the voice of thy wrongs unheard. For thee thee alone I live. I will not shun this wretchedness till thou art free, and then, then—if indeed the misery I dream of be mine own—I can but die—my fate will be accomplished; but now, now, but one thought must nerve, one hope encourage. Mother, thou shalt be free!"

He gave his horse the spur, as if indeed the goal he sought were near, and ere his thoughts returned to a calmer channel, his page Malcolm urged his steed up to his master's side. The devotion this boy bore to the person of Sir Amiot was something remarkable. He was a sharp, clever lad, in reality of some sixteen or seventeen years, but appearing rather younger; his agility and address we have already seen in a former page (for it is an old acquaintance we have here introduced to the reader), as shown in his devotion to the Countess of Buchan and her

son, in enabling the king to rescue the former, and then bearing him intelligence of her second capture. From that time till a few months after Sir Amiot's joining the Bruce, he had been like a wandering spirit over Scotland, at one time with the king and his followers in Rathlin, at another, in the court of Angus of the Isles, then in the very midst of the English camp, and repeatedly, when the Bruce returned to Scotland, did the intelligence his wanderings had gathered, materially assist the councils and movements of the patriots, until at last his intelligence and alacrity became so remarkable, that many wished to own him as their page or follower, an honour, however, the boy invariably refused, preferring, it appeared, his liberty to the constant service even of the king. It was on returning to the camp, after one of his accustomed wanderings, he discovered that a new cavalier had joined the king, and his curiosity was instantly attracted; whether he had found means to gratify it no one could discover, but certain it was the influence of Sir Amiot had acted on him like a spell, and from that hour his fidelity and devotion to the stranger knight became remarkable. He had as usual quitted the regular line of march, and had been, to the great amusement of some of his younger comrades, and to the discomposure of the older and stricter disciplinarians, curvetting and prancing round and round, often disappearing, as he said, to examine every brake and hollow that they passed, and rejoining the troop when least expected. Many marvelled that Sir Amiot could brook this laxity of order and respect in his personal follower, but his freaks always passed unnoticed, and were generally more productive of good than ill. He now rode up close to his master, saying, as he did so, "Please you, my lord, methinks his grace were better following our track than marching southward; if it please you to put yourself under my guidance, you may be the first to rescue the Lady Agnes yet."

"How! what?" exclaimed Sir Amiot, fairly startled out of every other thought; "what mean you—there is no trace of such a band?"

"No; such kind of villains love not the open road, as your lordship knows, but there are brakes and hollows enough to our left to harbour double their number. Will you risk it, good my lord? I dare not promise entire success,

but even if we fail, it will be but the loss of an hour or two, which Lord Randolph will pardon when he knows the cause, and should we succeed, King Robert will give us absolution. Those English knaves told false; their course lies towards Edinburgh, little dreaming how it is beleaguered."

There was an earnestness about the boy that would have satisfied his master, even had he not been conscious that Malcolm very seldom spoke from bare suggestion. Sir Amiot therefore made no hesitation in altering his line of march, and plunging into the wild desolate country to which Malcolm alluded. Much surprise the resolution occasioned amongst his men, and some discomposure, which latter feeling became very greatly heightened, as hour after hour passed and there was no sign whatever to reward their toilsome progress; even Sir Amiot's patience began to fail, and he somewhat sharply upbraided his page for wiling him on a fool's errand. Malcolm evinced neither anger nor sullenness, but simply observed he had not *promised* success. But the boy knew well enough he had not reckoned without his host; about an hour before sunset they reached a level, unencumbered by wood or rock, and pushing forwards, a band of some fifty or sixty men were distinctly visible, though evidently at full a mile's distance from them; they were closely wrapped in the dark green cloaks peculiar to the marauder of glen and wood, carried no banner, and kept in a close, compact body, though riding at full speed.

"By St. Andrew, thou hast spoken rightly, Malcolm. Forward, in heaven's name!"

"Keep them in sight, keep them in sight, that is all we can do!" shouted Malcolm, as every man spurred on; "overtake them here we cannot, it is an open road to Edinburgh. I hoped to have come upon them in dell and dingle, when we would have given them a taste of Scottish steel; but here it is impossible, only mark where they go."

Sir Amiot heard his words, but his ardent spirit could not feel the chase impossible. Their horses had been refreshed by above an hour's rest, at intervals, in the woods through which they had passed; a detention against which Malcolm loudly protested, declaring the slow pace they had been compelled to proceed prevented all fatigue, but the

men had grumbled, and Sir Amiot's interference in their favour had alone prevented open strife, though he now perceived the cause of Malcolm's great desire to avoid unnecessary delay, and felt provoked for having yielded perhaps more than was needed to his followers. Regret was now vain, and on they went, urging their steeds to the utmost speed, but gaining little on the pursued, who, evidently conscious of their vicinity, flew rather than galloped over the smooth road. The castle of Edinburgh appeared in sight, hailed by both pursuers and pursued. Although the chase led the former some distance from the side where Lord Randolph lay, and exposed them to danger from the castle, neither Sir Amiot nor his men cast one thought on this; nearer and nearer they approached the English, near enough to distinguish the white robes of a female, whom their hearts told them was the Lady Agnes, seated in front of one who seemed the leader, a tall strong man, mounted on a powerful horse. The sight urged them to yet stronger efforts; they rushed on, they flew over the intervening space; they struggled up the steep ascent; foam covered their gallant steeds, their limbs reeked and trembled under them, but, obedient to the voice and hand of their masters, they relaxed nerve nor muscle on their way. Nearer, yet nearer, within hail, spear in rest, Sir Amiot dashed forward, his lance rung against the armour of the hindmost; shouting his war-cry, he pressed forwards, dealing his blows on every side, but seeking only the centre charger, which bore the form of Agnes; ere he reached it, ere his men could form around him, his opponents had passed the postern, bearing him in the rush along with them; the massy gates closed, the portcullis fell, and Sir Amiot was struggling alone amongst a hundred foes, divided by iron gates and impregnable walls from his followers, who reached the level space beside the postern just in time to see it close, and their lord a captive.

Baffled, stung to the quick by the bitter consciousness of his own imprudence, the Knight of the Branch struggled furiously amongst his captors; nor did his sword drop, his strength fail, until he stood beside the drooping form of Agnes, his arm entwined around her. There was a light in her dark blue eyes, a hectic flush on her fair cheek, but she gave no other sign either of sorrow or of fear. She

had looked up in the knight's face a moment in inquiring surprise, and seeming to recognise the brilliant flash of his large dark eye, and he heard her murmur—

“How came he here—was it to seek me? but why should he care so much for me? Do not fear, sir knight, they will not, they dare not harm either thee or me. My love is near, though I cannot see him now, and he will save us both, both, for thou art kind to Agnes!”

“Hear me!” exclaimed Sir Amiot, passionately, as, despite every effort of his captors to divide them, he still retained his hold of Agnes. “Hear me, I speak to ye as men, as knights and soldiers, not as the robber band I believed ye! Ye know not the affliction of this poor innocent, or surely, surely ye would not have selected her for prey. The miseries your monarch, the late Edward, inflicted on her and one dearer than her life, has maddened her—robbed the mind of its precious jewel, and left but this lovely wreck; her only sense of enjoyment is in freedom, unwatched, untended freedom. She can do harm or good to none; let her go free; if ye have but one gentle feeling in your hearts, I implore ye let her go free. Do with me as ye list, but for this poor helpless innocent have mercy! what would ye with her?”

“Ransom, a goodly ransom,” answered he who seemed their leader, taking off his helmet and displaying the features of Sir Magnus Redman, an Anglo-Irish knight, noted for his ferocity and avarice. “Thinks your wisdom we have nothing to do but to take captives and let them go? Thou hast a child's fancy, though a fertile one, sir knight; thou hast coined a pretty sounding tale in a marvellously short time; how know we its truth? The maiden has given no evidence of madness; aye, hath comported herself more submissively and wisely than most of her sex in such cases.”

“Look on her!” passionately interrupted Sir Amiot. “Are ye so dulled in sense and sight, as not to read in this sweet, sad face, the pitiable truth? Is there aught there save the helpless innocence of affliction? Send her to Lord Randolph's camp, and I swear to thee, by the true honour of a knight and soldier, I will rest me your prisoner till her ransom and mine are both told down, till every claim hath been satisfied; give her freedom, and trust me, King Robert will be no niggard of his gold.”

"Ha! holds he her safety at so high a rate? You have overreached yourself, most sapient sir; an he would so reward us did we give her freedom, what will he not give to purchase that freedom? We are no chickens to be caught by fair words; she rests within stone walls till her friends choose to send a good round sum for her liberation. Meanwhile, your cavalier errant called king may amuse himself in seeking her through the borders; an he deem her worthy such a stir, we shall but know her value, and demand accordingly. Ha! ha! it were worth some risk to see him scour the borders in search of a bird caged up so blithely here, where his arms can never reach her."

"Villain!" exclaimed Sir Amiot, forgetting all personal danger in his strong indignation. "Brag on as thou wilt, there were sufficient with me to give King Robert note of this poor maiden's fate ere he could reach the border. There thou art foiled, base miscreant! and for this castle, lay not such stress on its strong walls, it will fall yet, and we shall be free, no thanks to thee or thine. Cheer up, sweet one!" he added, to Agnes; "'tis but confinement for a brief, brief while—the king will save his Agnes. But wherefore bandy words with such as thee!" he suddenly continued, as he felt Agnes cling closer to him, shrinking from the rude forms who now surrounded them. "Methought Sir Geoffrey de Harcourt was commander here. I demand speech with him; as knight to knight, and gentle to gentle, he will grant me patient hearing. Back, I say! an he have command here, ye must acknowledge his supremacy."

"Sir Geoffry de Harcourt is a wiser man than your wisdom deems him; we pay good price for our will in the castle of Edinburgh, and he knows his own interests better than to interfere with Magnus Redman and his prisoners. But a truce with this idle parley—part them, I say!"

On the instant it was done. No word or sound escaped the lips of Agnes, as her convulsive though almost unconscious grasp of Sir Amiot was rudely unloosed; he saw her eyes fix themselves on vacancy, with the wild intense gaze he knew so well; but the object they seemed to search evidently eluded them; a dark shade passed over her countenance, a quick shuddering through every limb, and he saw her head droop on the shoulder of her conductor, as if all

sense were awhile suspended.. He struggled to spring towards her, but his purpose was frustrated.

"Away with him to the strong tower on the southern wall!" shouted Sir Magnus; and they bore him off with a velocity as almost to prevent his tracing the path they took. They traversed courts, passed many bands of soldiery, who were all too much accustomed to Sir Magnus Redman's predatory expeditions to make any remark; and at length they halted at the entrance of a low square tower, formed of massive stone, overlooking the southern wall and the precipitous crags which it commanded, and conducted the captive knight up several steep flights of stairs to a small chamber, the only window of which, though it commanded a view beneath, was strongly barricaded by cross-barred stanchions of iron. The door, too, was thickly studded with iron nails, locked and double-locked upon him, and the walls of cold, bare stone permitted not the faintest hope of escape.

Sir Amiot could not but feel he had been imprudent in pressing the chase so closely. Now that his mood was cooler, he felt it would have been much wiser to have remained contented with knowing exactly where the Lady Agnes was, and setting his best energies to work, to urge Randolph to push on the siege. He trusted much to the wit and intelligence of his page to give Sir Thomas all the information that was needed, not alone as to his fate, but as to all the causes of his detention and the king's great anxiety for the release of Agnes. Would they think of despatching a messenger on the instant to Dumbarton, to stay, if possible, the march of the king, was a question returning again and again to his mind, and he paced the narrow precincts of his prison in all the nervous irritability which ever attends the longing desire for rapid movement, when its importance is known, and we ourselves are utterly unable to forward it. The very darkness seemed to chafe him, he wanted to see if the movements of the besieging army were visible from his loophole, and what part of the castle it commanded; he heard nothing that betrayed the vicinity of many soldiers, even the sentinel's tread appeared at some distance and irregular, as if that particular spot were less strongly guarded than the others. He looked eagerly forth, but there was no moon, and he saw nothing but darkness. Then he tried to compose himself by thinking of Agnes,

but there was no composure for him there. He pictured her sufferings in solitary confinement, or under the wardance of harsh and strange guardians, till he almost shuddered, for liberty was no common joy to her, it was actually her life, her being now; her madness lost its sting, her paroxysms of anguish were less and less frequent the more perfect freedom she enjoyed, and so fragile seemed the link between the mortal shell and life, that he knew not what irreparable injury imprisonment and harshness might produce. Then, to escape the anxiety of such thoughts, he tried to turn them in another channel, over which the form of the Lady Isoline hovered like a bright radiant star, which ought certainly to have shed light and hope, but somehow even this light was faint and flickering, and often lost altogether beneath heavy masses of black clouds that would float over his horizon, and yet, if the truth must be told, the knight's thoughts lingered there still more powerfully, more constantly than elsewhere; he would have declared, simply from his proneness to the desponding and the sad, as he had no hope. However, if he had no hope, memory was kind, for she recalled in that darkness every look and word and varying tone of Isoline so vividly, he more than once felt himself entranced, not even needing the aid of sleep to give them voice and substance; nay, he would rather have shunned sleep, lest it should break the spell—and so passed the night.

The morning gave Sir Amiot the information he desired. Within twenty yards of the tower rose the wall, which, somewhat to his surprise, was there not above twice a man's height. Looking further, it was easy to perceive that the excessive steepness and extraordinary shape and position of the rock at that point had occasioned this, the architect of the castle believing, with some appearance of justice, that crags themselves were sufficient defence, being wholly inaccessible; crags and cliffs jutted out from the main rock on every side; the foundations of the walls themselves appeared scarcely to allow space for a scaling-ladder, shelving down in some parts to a complete precipice, at others, varied by protruding rocks. A single sentinel was there on guard, his march, however, taking a contrary direction to that which Sir Amiot's loophole overlooked. Situated cornerwise, he only saw the wall and crags, a circumstance occa-

sioning some regret, as he almost fancied the Scottish army might be visible to the sentinel from the top of the wall, though concealed from him.

With the strong feeling of a soldier within him, learned in all military tactics, he could not but admire the impregnable situation of the fortress, and the desire to see it in King Robert's possession became stronger than ever, though its impregnability seemed to whisper how vain was that desire. Still he almost hoped the confinement of the Lady Agnes, and King Robert's earnest desire to obtain her freedom, would urge Randolph to more decided measures than he had yet adopted. It was only by the conquest of the castle he could look to obtaining his individual liberty, for the ransom which he knew his avaricious captor would demand was utterly out of his power to pay, and he saw before him nothing but the dim, shapeless vista of lingering imprisonment, entirely preventing the fulfilment of his vow, while his companions would be gathering fresh laurels, and perhaps the liberation he so earnestly desired to effect by his own right hand, would become the glory of another, and his present doom remain unchanged. Isoline, too, how might he find her, if years passed ere he was free? the wife of Douglas; and though, as we have seen in a former page, he had no hope, or fancied he had none, that she could ever become his, the idea of meeting her as the wife of another was fraught with such intolerable suffering, that his imprisonment and inactivity became doubly hateful. Even the king, he thought, would forget him after a few years—forget his very existence; how could he, with so many gallant officers round him, so many calls upon his head and heart, retain a kindly recollection of all who fell or were imprisoned in his cause? Now these multifarious cogitations were anything but agreeable, particularly as Sir Amiot chanced to be one of that curious class denominated self-tormentors, ever looking to the dark rather than the sunny side of life. In truth, perchance he had more cause for these fancies than most of his class, for he was peculiarly and mournfully situated, and the long, weary hours of his captivity permitted no cheering prospect. He tried to find amusement in polishing his armour—already polished as high as art could make it—but that was but a sad resource. He tried to fancy how a party of daring adventurers might

scale the crags just at that point and mount the wall, and then smiled at the fertility of his imagination, picturing things sober reason felt impossible. The second night of his captivity was partially illuminated by a young moon, whose lights and shadows playing fantastically on the rocks excited even his admiring attention. The third night was pitchy dark, neither moon nor star for several hours being visible. Still Sir Amiot remained by his loophole, as if the darkness presented objects either to his bodily or mental eye, preferable to the hard couch and feverish sleep which was his only alternative with this sorrowful vigil. There was a sensation at his heart very like the prognostics of a thunder-storm, a sort of feverish excitement, likely enough to follow the morbid streams of unchecked thought, when indulged in for any length, and unrelieved by words. The cool, March breeze that fanned his cheek through the open spaces of his loophole, however, gave no evidence of thunder lingering in the air, and Sir Amiot remained at his post, looking out on the darkness till his excited fancy almost made him believe he could distinguish objects, moving masses of darkness round and about the jutting cliffs. There was no sound, not a breath to disturb the perfect stillness, except when, now and then, a fresh breeze swept by, bearing some of the heavy clouds along with it, and making the deep gloom a degree less obscure.

By the length of time since the set of sun Sir Amiot imagined it must be fast approaching midnight, still he felt no inclination whatever for repose, and remained at his post. If these black, moving shapes were the mere delusions of fancy, their constancy was something remarkable, for however the knight shook himself, rubbed his eyes, nay, even took a turn in his cell, to assure himself he was awake, not dreaming, still they were visible. If disappearing, which they often did for some minutes, he traced them again in a different part of the crag, gradually floating—for no other word can give an idea of their motion, at least as it appeared to Sir Amiot—nearer the foundation of the wall. Shape and substance indeed he could not give them, for he could only have described them as small detached masses of black cloud hovering around and about the cliff. Had any one suggested the idea of human beings, he would have declared it impossible; for, in the

first place, they had not the smallest semblance of humanity, though that might have been the treachery of the night; and the next and more convincing, no human foot could possibly find resting on those crags. That the sentinel either did not see this strange appearance, or if he did, thought nothing of it, at first surprised our hero, and somewhat disagreeably heightened the feelings of superstitious awe he felt, much to his annoyance, creeping over him; but then he remembered that the sentinel's post and line of march did not look in the same direction as his loophole, and so perhaps he really could not see them. More than once he felt almost tempted to shout aloud to the man, and inquire if he saw anything remarkable about the cliffs, but checked the wish as cowardly folly. They appeared to dive in and out the crags like passing shadows, but there was no light in the heavens to occasion them; and, after some time, Sir Amiot thought he had succeeded in making himself believe they were in fact nothing but illusion, occasioned by the darkness around, seeming less opaque against the white cliffs. Just as he thought of retiring, satisfied with this belief, rendered stronger by their having disappeared for a much longer interval than usual, they again became visible, and much nearer the wall, though still presenting nothing to his strained gaze but moving darkness. At this instant the steps of the guard resounded close under Sir Amiot's tower, as they marched on to relieve the sentinel, and see that all was right, and at the same instant, beneath his very eye, those mysterious shapes had vanished into their parent darkness he believed, for he could not distinguish the faintest trace. Wrought up to a state of almost painful excitement, the steps of the guard absolutely jarred upon his nerves, and he started with undefined terror as he heard a heavy stone thrown from the wall, roll noisily from crag to crag till it reached the precipice, and fell to the ground, followed by the voice of the sentinel, exclaiming—

“Ha! ha! keep close, I see you well!”

Sir Amiot's very respiration seemed impeded as he listened for what might follow, but nothing came, save the joyous laugh of the soldiers, betraying their consciousness of their comrade's jest, and bidding him time it better on another occasion; then followed the sentinel's assertion he had frightened them, however they might deny it, a merry

dispute, and the steps passed on, and all again was silence, deep, soundless as the grave. Again the knight looked forth, but for some time, to his fevered fancy it seemed full half an hour, he looked in vain; and then again, one by one, seeming to glide from behind the crags, those shapes appeared; cautiously, silently they glided nearer; he lost them behind the wall, but not for long, one by one, he saw them stand upon the wall, one, two, and three, and shapeless they were no longer; was it fancy or reality—surely, they bore the forms of men, and one, the first who ascended, could it be, as Sir Amiot's wild imagination pictured, the peculiarly light, bounding form of his own page? He dared not utter a sound; fascinated, entranced as by some spell, his eyes moved not, he breathed thickly and painfully; he counted thirty of those strange shapes ascend, pause a moment on the wall, and descend within it, how, he could not distinguish; they passed beneath his prison so silently, so glidingly, even yet the idea of supernatural visitants remained uppermost, and chilled his very heart's blood, even while it strove to bound up at the thought of liberty. One shape alone remained on the wall, it flew past, disappeared, then came the sound of a brief struggle to his ear, a stifled, quivering cry of death, a heavy plunge, and then again all was silent. He listened intently, almost frenzied by the wild desire to unfold the mysteries of that darkness and silence, to burst his bonds, to join that gallant band, for if they were mortal men, he knew well their purpose. Still there was no sound; every minute felt an hour. Sir Amiot knew not how short a space had, in fact, rolled by since they had disappeared. Was it fancy, or was that silence becoming peopled by distant sounds, waxing louder and more loud, nearer and more near? A moment's indecision, and the next Sir Amiot bounded from his prison-floor, and clasped his hands in ecstasy. "It is—it is!" he shouted. "Brave, glorious Randolph, this is your work! Oh, why can I not join thee! Why am I enclosed—caged? Is there no means of liberty?" and he shook the iron door with violence, but in vain. Every shout that burst upon his ear thrilled through him, as if he too had joined the strife. Wild was the uproar, stunning the din that, breaking the previous stillness, reached even his distant tower, and told of the work without. A thousand torches seemed

to flash up through the thick darkness; cries for mercy, shouts of triumph came strangely mingled on his ear; clashing steel, confused sounds as of the very brunt of war, came so close upon him, he felt the strife was carried on beneath his very walls: then came louder and fuller shouts of triumph; he felt, as by instinct, the gates had been flung open by that secret band, and free entrance given to the awaiting army. It could not have been an hour from the commencement of the strife, when, even in the midst of the din without, Sir Amiot's quick ear discerned nearer sounds, hasty, eager steps bounding up the turret-stair; his heart throbbed violently. Was it liberation, or his vindictive captor armed with death? The one, he knew, was as likely as the other; and who may tell the emotion of that moment? There was the sound of heavy bars removed, hastened evidently by the strokes of a heavy mallet; then came the clash of keys, a suppressed oath, when three or four were tried unsuccessfully, and then a shout of joy in well-known tones. The door flew back, and Malcolm was at his master's feet.

"I thought the villain had died with a lie in his throat and told me wrong," he exclaimed, concealing all emotion under his usual recklessness; "but he has not, and I thank him. Away, away, my dear master! I hoped to have brought you freedom time enough to give you the pleasure of sharing our glorious game; but I fear me that is over now. We have had but too easy a victory: the ill-fated slaves were all asleep and comfortable, and rushed out in pretty guise, as you may believe. Sir Thomas would hardly permit the gates to be opened till the game were won; thirty armed men against two hundred unarmed and in pitiable confusion, he deemed but fair play; and so the castle is ours, and you are liberated."

"I little dreamed," said Sir Amiot, "those gliding forms of darkness were you and my brave companions; so little did I think it, that more than once I was about to hail the soldier on the wall, and demand if he saw aught, the shapes seemed so to mock me."

"By St. Andrew, my good lord, it was well you did not; that poor sorry fool, the first to go to his account, startled us enough with his ill-timed jest; he little thought his idle words might have so much truth."

"Ha! you heard them then—and the stone?"

"Came thundering down directly over our heads, threatening inevitable destruction had a single man of us moved or stirred; but Randolph was with us, and so calm, so collected even at such a moment, if there were anything like fear amongst us, it was stilled at once."

"Then my sight did not deceive me; it was you, my gallant boy, the first to stand upon the wall—I thought it, yet dared not credit it."

"And why not, my lord? I thought you knew there is no mount, no cliff, no wall too steep for Malcolm, and he wills to scale it. Aye, I first, Sir Andrew Grey the next, and Randolph himself, brave heart, the third; he would not trust this daring deed to other than himself, and well deserves to win it. Haste on, my lord, he longs to greet thee free."

And they did haste on, for this brief conference had not detained them in the tower, but took place as they hurried through the courts—how changed in aspect to three days before—towards the keep. The actual strife was over, but the dead and dying English gave fearful tokens of its fierceness and effect, some indeed yet struggled; the clash of weapons was still distinguished at distant intervals, but faint and hesitating. Already the Scotch were busy in clearing the ground, slippery with blood, in securing their prisoners, flinging open all the dungeon doors, and giving liberty to many who had there changed youth for age. Troop after troop of Randolph's men, with banners flying, and heralded by martial and triumphant music, were marching proudly and leisurely over the drawbridge and through the widely open posterns, and meeting in the centre court before the keep; their glittering armour flashing back the blazing light of a hundred torches, their shouts forming a glad, deep bass to the drums and clarions—all presenting a scene of such spirit-stirring interest, Sir Amiot's heart throbbed high with exultation, to the utter exclusion of every saddening feeling. Shout after shout hailed his reappearance; his own followers breaking from their ranks, thronged round him, and Randolph himself, seeing his approach from the entrance to the keep, hastened to meet and embrace him.

"Welcome, welcome, most gallant Amiot!" he said

eagerly ; "the joy of seeing thee again at liberty banishes the regret that thou wert not at my side in this exciting enterprise. It is but fitting thou shouldst have some share of its glory ; though, by mine honour, hadst not thou and the Lady Agnes been within these walls, methinks that paragon of pages had hardly obtained such hearing or such influence. Thou wert made captive in seeking her rescue, he tells me, so 'tis meet and just thou shouldst give her freedom. Thy presence, too, will startle her less than other of my knights, gallant as thou perchance, but scarce as gentle."

"Thanks for the grateful task," answered the knight, gaily ; "but tell me first—the king, has his march to the borders been prevented by the tidings his afflicted Agnes is here ?"

"Yes ; the boy Malcolm related all that had passed, and I dispatched a messenger back to Dumbarton on the instant ; he was just in time, one troop had commenced their march, but were easily recalled. His grace was greatly relieved, but sent word to leave no stone unturned to gain the fortress or her freedom, well knowing what confinement is to her."

"And well hast thou performed thy mission," said Sir Amiot, grasping Randolph's hand with energy. "Noble, glorious Randolph, I could envy thee thy laurels."

"Nay, nay, thou hast plucked too many thyself to grudge me mine," replied the warrior ; "besides," he continued, half sadly, "remember, I must gather enough to cover former errors, ere I may wear them as meeds of glory."

Hastily, joyously Sir Amiot sprung up the narrow staircase he pointed out as leading to the turret room where Agnes was imprisoned ; they had given him the keys, but he stood and paused a moment, not knowing which door, among several that faced him, led to her. He was not long in doubt, her voice thrilled upon his ear, mournfully, painfully, and low, but still, as was almost always its wont, in broken fragments of song. Sir Amiot could not bear more, there was such an utter hopelessness, such piercing suffering in those low thrilling tones, that even without the words in which she had thrown her thoughts, tears would have arisen, and his hand so shook with emotion, he could

scarcely place the key within the lock, or prevent the clashing of the rest. Her voice sunk on the instant, but on his entrance she bounded forward with a cry of joy.

"I am free then, oh, I am free! I may quit these hateful walls, or thou wouldst not be here, kind warrior. Speak I not truth? oh, tell me I may go hence, go seek my own love among the flowers and streams he loves; it is long, long, oh, so long since I have seen him; he cannot smile on me here. I am free, oh, tell me I am free."

"Free as the breeze thou lovest, free as the mountain stream, sweet lady," answered Sir Amiot, in the low gentle tone she had learned to understand, and his heart throbbed with a strange pleasure as he felt her cling to his arm, and look up in his face with the loving confidence he had sought for months in vain. To his anxious eye the complexion was more transparent, the features more delicate, yet, as if the days of her confinement had left her not untouched, but the change was so faintly perceptible he could not have defined it. That now and then there were symptoms of returning sanity were visible to all, and indeed King Robert and Isoline indulged the hope, that one day might see that beautiful mind effectually restored. They saw not, they could not see the form was dwindling more and more into a spirit shape, and that perchance the same day that saw the mind in beauty would wing the soul away.

"Free, free!" she repeated, the musical laugh of glee banishing all sadness from her voice. "Oh, what joy for Agnes! and hast thou done this, gallant Amiot? Oh, that I could give thee the love thou deservest, but I cannot; alas, no! I have no love for earth now, save for King Robert. I see my Nigel hovering round him, when he is in danger or in woe, guarding him from peril, beguiling him from grief. He loves Robert, and so then must I. But for thee, what can I do to make thee glad, sir knight?"

"Love me, call me brother!" murmured Sir Amiot, in strong emotion; "dearest, loveliest, call me brother!"

"Brother!" she repeated, and the expression of her features sadly changed; "methinks I had a brother once, but it was long, long since, and he faded away even before my own noble love, who smiles on me from

heaven. Brother—no, no, I will not call thee brother, for it makes me sad, and I could weep, I know not why, save that when I hear that word, darkness seems to come upon me, peopled only by dreams of pain. But tell me, kind Amiot, what was that sudden noise I heard, when I thought every one slept but me, and such a glare of light, and clashing weapons? methought 'twas a dream of that which hath been, for such strange thoughts came with it, such sharp and bitter pain. Hath there been such noise, or was it but the wild visions of my poor brain?"

"Nay, it was no vision, 'twas real, sweet one. Randolph hath won the castle, hath gained thy liberty and mine, and done King Robert yet nobler service. He fought and won."

"Ha! said I not so?" exclaimed Agnes, suddenly withdrawing herself from the support of the knight, and standing almost majestically erect, a vivid flush on her cheek, her eye glistening in unwonted radiance. "Said I not victory would be ours? When did King Robert strike in vain, since He said that they should conquer? Strive on, strive on, bold hearts! He who might not fight for ye on earth, blesses ye from heaven. Scotland shall be free, shall be exalted; her king triumphant!"

The brief emotion passed as quickly as it came, followed by a slight convulsion through every limb, and contracting her features as if by sudden and irrepressible agony. Sir Amiot tenderly raised her in his arms and laid her on the couch. He had now often seen and mourned over these fearful paroxysms, and it did not therefore take him by surprise; he bent over her in commiserating pity, conscious he could do nothing till Nature herself gave relief, in the usual burst of agonizing tears. And then he left her, aware that such was always the custom of those who had her in charge, as aught like observation in such moments ever seemed to irritate instead of soothe.

He left the door of her apartment open, trusting, that after the usual interval of internal suffering, the consciousness of perfect freedom would operate beneficially. Nor was he deceived; for the sun had not risen above an hour, ere her light form appeared hovering amongst the busy and triumphant soldiers, bearing no evidence of previous suffering, but looking on for a few minutes with the amused and

curious look of childhood, and then bounding to the more solitary courts, from mound to mound, and wall to wall, her sweet voice ringing forth in song, rejoicing she was free.

A few words from Randolph sufficed to inform Sir Amiot of all that had passed in his brief captivity. His men, after the first moment of despondency as to their master's fate, and their own utter inability to avert it, urged on by Malcolm, hastened to Lord Randolph's tent, and gave him concise and instant intelligence of all that had occurred since they had left his camp, including, of course, the disappearance of the Lady Agnes; the king's anxiety and resolution to seek her; the discovery of her track, pursuit, and brief scuffle at the postern of the castle, and the fatal effects of Sir Amiot's daring. Randolph heard them with his wonted attention, despatched a messenger with these tidings instantly to the king, and then set his energetic mind actively to work in what manner to proceed; for gain the castle he vowed no power on earth should prevent.

The next morning, before daybreak, Malcolm sought him, requesting a private interview, which was granted on the instant. The lad then told him that, during his wanderings and adventures, he had often been in the habit of clambering up the crags on the southern side of the castle and making his way over the wall, which was there very low and unguarded, into the very centre of the fortress; it was thus, mingling in disguise familiarly amongst the English, he had procured the information which he had so loved to report mysteriously to the king or his officers. He had done this, he said, continually in almost every fortress occupied by the English, partly for his amusement, partly in the hope of finding some one whom he loved; but the southern crags of Edinburgh Castle were more familiar to him than any. To make assurance doubly sure, he had employed the night previous in retracing his customary path, and found he had not forgotten one particular concerning it. He had mounted as far as the wall, and clambered down again wholly unperceived. He was certain, if Lord Randolph would only trust him, he could lead a select body of daring adventurers to the very foot of the wall, which, with the aid of rope-ladders, they could easily surmount and descend. He acknowledged the path was no easy one, and that there was most imminent

risk, for if discovered by the English in the act of descending, they must every one of them inevitably perish, still he felt no fear; and if Lord Randolph would only leave to him the choice of the men, he should see how admirably they would succeed.

For some little time the warrior paused in deep and weighty thought. He did not doubt the page in the very least, for his acuteness and agility had been too often proved, and he knew he was trusted by the king himself. Still the risk was too great, the danger too extreme for him to venture on a resolution by himself alone. He then summoned Sir Andrew Grey, Sir Aleck Fraser, and one or two others noted for their courage and sagacity, held a brief council, and finally decided on the daring attempt. Malcolm on his part was not idle. Eight-and-twenty picked men he selected from the ranks, and brought to Randolph and his colleagues for approval, who examined them separately, told them what was needed, and in the joyous excitement which the very idea of the enterprise created received confirmation sufficient of their mettle and necessary coolness. His next care was to prepare his army so as to march through the different gates the moment they were flung open from within. This had all to be done after dark, lest their movements should attract the attention of the guard on the walls. Great then was the disappointment, when the night decided on for the attack, the moon, though young, shone so brightly as to prevent the attempt, and compel them to defer it. The darkness of the next, however, appeared to favour the enterprise, and, despite the fear the moon might break through the clouds ere the wall was gained, their ardour could be restrained no longer. The main army, divided into five strong bands, under experienced leaders, was marshalled silently and cautiously around the castle, to enter at once by every postern flung open for their admittance; and Randolph himself, with Sir Andrew Grey and Sir Aleck Fraser, placed themselves at the head of their eight-and-twenty picked men, and with beating hearts, but cool, collected daring, gave themselves up to the truth and guidance of Sir Amiot's page.

The rest is known. How they ascended they afterwards declared they could not tell, for on looking back by daylight, they could not trace their path, nor imagine how they

had contrived to clamber up and round the crags ; a false step, a loosened stone, a word spoken, must inevitably have betrayed them, and occasioned their entire destruction, simply by stones flung from above. The intensity of alarm even in their hardy breasts, when the voice of the sentinel was heard, declaring he saw them, and for the moment actually believed he did, may be perhaps imagined, but certainly not described. Well it was for them there had not been one wavering spirit, one uncertain heart amongst them, or the soldier's jest would have been speedily turned to earnest, and that moment their last.

Great indeed was the triumph of this important conquest ; but there was no more pride and exultation in the gallant men through whose immediate agency it had been accomplished than in their comrades ; they felt they had but done what every other Scotsman would have done, and that they had been chosen was more the work of chance than their own merits. Their only anxiety was for the approving look of their sovereign, the joy it would be to tell him another strong castle was at his feet ; and therefore, when Lord Randolph publicly asked them what reward he could bestow on them over and above their fellows, the unanimous shout arose for permission to accompany those who bore the tidings to the king.

"Be it so, then, gallant hearts !" exclaimed Randolph, frankly and joyously. "Sunset shall see ye at Dumbarton, and our noble king shall receive the Lady Agnes in life and freedom, and tidings of Edinburgh's downfall at the same time. Will you, gallant Amiot, accompany Grey and Fraser once more to the king, or will ye rest with me ? an ye prefer the first, by St. Andrew it is but your due ; for without thy sagacity in tracking these marauding villains to their haunt, the Lady Agnes might still have been in captivity, and the king wasting his strength and hazarding his precious life in inglorious border warfare. Thou wert the paladin to risk life and lose liberty for this fair lady, and it is but right thou shouldst conduct her in all honour to the king."

"Yes, do thou go with me, gentle Amiot," interposed Agnes herself, who had, unobserved, neared the martial throng, and now clung to the knight's arm ; "do thou take me to King Robert, and I will tell him how kind and good

thou hast been to his poor Agnes, and he will give thee the love I cannot ; and thou wilt lead me to the valleys and mountains I love, and pluck me fresh flowers and weave me bright garlands, wilt thou not ? yes, yes. Go thou with me."

Her voice thrilled upon those rude hearts around till they absolutely melted before it, and men, a moment before alive but to the dream of glory and triumph, and all the sterner themes of war, felt a strange quivering of eye and lip, and turned away lest weakness should be betrayed. Sir Amiot's impulse, even at that moment, was to fold that fragile being to his yearning heart, and vow protection and kindness not alone for that brief journey, but for ever and for ever ; for if *his* might not be that right, oh, whose might it be ? but he could not claim it then—and there he might not prove the claim.

Preparations for departure were speedily arranged. With a concise narrative of the enterprise, Lord Randolph expressed the wish that the king would himself march to occupy Edinburgh, as, from its position, its great strength, its command of the sea, he deemed it well adapted for the capital of his kingdom, far better suited for that purpose than Perth, which, lying more at the entrance of the highlands, appeared to confine his dominions to the north, and left the south to the mercy of its feudal lords. Sir Amiot, Fraser, and Grey gladly accepted the charge of these suggestions, and, armed with all proper directions, set off on their route.

It was a joyous journey. Nature seemed doubly smiling to the gaze of the free—for no nations are more alive to her changeful aspect than are mountaineers ; and it appeared as if their many wanderings in the bosom of their country, the many times they had found shelter and protection and concealment in her vast solitudes and frowning mountains and hidden dells, had endeared her yet more to their hearts, and excited yet more intense rejoicing in her freedom, in the widely-different aspect she presented now to that of five brief years before. They passed through valleys, smiling in fertility and peace, undisturbed by the foot of the spoiler ; they traversed villages, whose every inmate came forth to their cottage doors to cry God's blessing on them for their bravery and patriotism ; they saw towns, whose mechanics and

citizens were peacefully pursuing their several occupations, undisturbed by even the dream of slavery and spoil. They remarked these things, and there was not a heart in that gallant band which did not throb higher in honest exultation, that, under a gracious Providence, their arms had done this—their country owed her freedom to her sons, and to none other.

It was a mournful satisfaction to witness the afflicted Agnes during this journey. She had chosen to ride, instead of using the litter Sir Amiot wished her to accept, and Malcolm was ever at her bridle-rein, quitting it but to start aside or gallop forwards to bring her some choice flower his quick eye perceived. He controlled his wandering propensities evidently to devote himself to her—a subject of some marvel to his comrades. Sir Amiot, too, rode beside her; quitting the gay converse of his colleagues, who rode ahead, and often besought him to join them, to tend and, when her rambling fancy would permit, talk with her. Her beautiful eye continually wandered round, lit up with glee, save when its gaze fixed itself on the azure heaven, and then the absorbing intensity of love which it betrayed, breathed that the fancy she could see the lost object of that love smiling upon her was again her own, and then words would escape her as if wholly unconscious of all outward objects save *his* presence, and then the carol of some wild song expressed the imaginings of her soul in words. Half the journey she performed on horseback, but then bodily energy failed, and she was glad to recline in the litter Sir Amiot's care had provided, on condition, she said, its curtains should be wide apart, that she might look upon beautiful nature, and feel that she was free, that her own spirit love might commune with her still.

There had been already excitement at Dumbarton Castle that day, for Lord Douglas had unexpectedly arrived with news of the final reduction of all Roxburgh, and the borders in its vicinity; and though he had no intention of as yet leaving the important province in the hands of his subalterns, he could not resist the impulse of paying his sovereign a flying visit, and receiving fresh spirit and hope from the bright eyes of the Lady Isoline.

King Robert was in high spirits; the sight of his favourite officer, and the news he brought, banishing for the time his

anxiety on account of Agnes, and unusual revelry and mirth rung round the festive board spread for the sunset meal. Determined not to evince the faintest sign of what in reality was passing or rather lay passive in her heart, Isoline's spirit outwardly appeared touched by the reigning gaiety of the hour, and Douglas found himself entranced as usual. Hope was warm within him, and his spirits were exulting beneath its influence; he revelled in her surpassing grace and beauty, sufficiently content with present enjoyment not to hazard words of love, which he well knew would occasion her to be as cold and reserved as she was now all life and brilliance. King Robert looked on them both and rejoiced, imagining his earnest wishes growing nearer and nearer completion. Isoline could not look thus, speak thus, had she any painful affection dwelling in her heart, and if there were none, Douglas must succeed.

The last gleam of daylight had disappeared, and the huge torches of pine shed their bright ruddy light on the large hall, but there was no cessation, no pause in the lively converse and gay jests passing round; the meal seemed prolonged, that the sociality it engendered might not be disturbed, when loudly and shrilly a trumpet sounded without the walls, followed by eager tramp and loud shouts of greeting from within.

"Ha! fresh tidings—that is Randolph's bugle blast!" exclaimed the king, starting up from his seat of state. "Quick! marshal in his messengers, they bring us pleasant news, or he would not send them. By St. Andrew, 'tis something more than common—listen to those shouts!"

And even as he spoke, "Victory—Randolph—Edinburgh is free!" came loudly borne towards the castle, as if the very breeze, envious of the tongues of men, first bore it to the ears of the sovereign. The words acted like electricity.

Douglas even forgot Isoline, and sprung up; a dozen other of the lords followed his example, and rushed tumultuously from the hall. But what was there in those simple words to bid the heart of Isoline thus bound up, and flush and pale her cheek alternately? She had been told Sir Amiot was a prisoner—a prisoner, aye, in his eagerness to obtain the freedom of Agnes; that he had madly, imprudently ha-

zarded not only liberty but life in his pursuit of her captors. To others this might seem but chivalry, carried on somewhat rashly, they had not seen his emotion when told of her capture; Isoline had, and that subsequent devotion was but the natural consequence of such feeling. What did it mean?—how might she answer, and yet feel his imprisonment, his danger, were matters of interest to her? but she did feel them; aye, despite her strivings for stoicism, her belief he could be nothing to her, felt nothing for her, there was no little suffering upon her heart, when fancy chose to picture all that might befall him in the hands of his enemies. Yet this she had successfully concealed, she had been bright and brilliant when every nerve was aching; but now those words, “Edinburgh is free!” and if so, *he* must be liberated, well nigh banished that extraordinary self-control, and threatened her heart’s betrayal. She felt her hands convulsively close, she could not have prevented it. She felt the life-blood leave her cheek and flow back to its fountain in her heart; a moment and it rushed through every vein, burning in her cheek, her lip, with indignation at herself. He stood before her, and his hand clasped that of Agnes; his plumed helmet was in his hand, but there was a smile on his lip, a flash in his bright eye, visible through the half mask, which told of satisfaction apart from her. There were many new forms within the hall. Sir Andrew Grey with the torn banner of England, Fraser with the pennon of St. George, which his own hand had plucked from the outer turret, and the tall, athletic forms of those gallant men who had been their companions in their daring deed; but Isoline saw them through a strange mist, in which only two objects were clear. Agnes clung to Sir Amiot’s arm, evidently anxious to spring forward to the king, but slightly and tenderly restrained by him. He was bending down his head to hers, and seeming to whisper some gentle words which had the effect of detaining her for a few minutes by his side.

“Free—conquered—ours!” were the first words distinctly intelligible to Isoline in the voice of her sovereign. “My noble, gallant Randolph, well hath atoned for boyhood’s errors. But, tell me, ere I hear more of this right glorious deed—the Lady Agnes, hath he found her scathless, uninjured? Is she free?”

"Aye, most gracious sovereign, and is here!" exclaimed Sir Amiot, joyfully, and withdrawing his arm at the same moment from the slender form he supported. Agnes bounded forward with that cry of glee so grateful to the sovereign's ear, and clasped his neck, clinging to his bosom as a child.

"Free—free! yes, I am free! Oh they kept me in stone walls, and far, far away from my own kind Robert; and I could not even seek flowers and listen to the birds, and there came dark thoughts upon me and such sharp pain, but they have all gone now. He came and rescued me, that gentle knight—and thou must love him for me, Robert, thou knowest poor Agnes cannot, she has no love now save for thee! Wilt thou not reward him? he has been so kind!"

King Robert gazed upon her, so beautiful, so innocent in her affliction, and even at that moment of rejoicing in her unexpected freedom, and triumph in her nephew's conquest, there came the memory of his brother on his soul, flinging its darkness on his lip and brow. What might not that lovely being have been had he lived? what would have been his brother's bliss, had he been still in life? Deep, pure as was Robert's joy in this glorious freedom of his country, he knew he felt it would have been exceeded by the joy of Nigel. How, amid such thoughts, could he think that beloved one was happier in heaven? He could not forget his horrible fate while Agnes yet lived, by her affliction to recall it so vividly; and in that moment of suddenly-awakened memory, the patriot, the warrior, the sovereign felt as if all was as nought, all could be sacrificed, to fold that brother in life, in beauty, to his yearning heart.

He bent his lordly head upon that of Agnes, and without uttering a syllable covered her pale brow with kisses, but there needed not words; his warriors read that sudden change of countenance, the form of Nigel seemed to float before them all, and for a brief minute there was a sudden hush of eager tongues, an involuntary pause.

"To the board, to the board, my gallant hearts!" exclaimed the king, conquering that moment of emotion, as Agnes, released from his embrace, seated herself as usual on a low settle at his side, content to look on and hear him. "Ye have ridden long and well to bear us thus speedily

these glorious tidings. Room there, for our faithful comrades, well worthy to feast with their king. Welcome, welcome, one and all! Fill high every cup—to Randolph and his thirty.”

Loudly, enthusiastically the words were echoed again and yet again, and well it was perhaps for Isoline, the confusion which for a few minutes ensued enabling her, ere room was found for the new arrivals and order restored, to regain at least the semblance of composure.

Sir Amiot's eye had sought her amid the group of females scattered round the monarch's table. There was an unusual expression of hilarity in those of his features which were visible, and in his whole manner, and he had made a hasty advance towards Isoline as Agnes sprung from him to the king, as if claiming her sympathy in the liberation of her friend; then, from some rising recollection, he suddenly checked himself, the bright flash faded from his eye, and he merely bowed lowly in the respectful salutation her rank demanded. The bow was acknowledged coldly, and it seemed to him reservedly, if not with unusual assumption of dignity, and the knight, chilled and saddened, took the place assigned him, and sought to join in the animated converse passing round him. Douglas had resumed his place by the side of the Lady Isoline, and she, as if resolved to prove her mastery over herself as well as over everyone else, and determined to brave even his misconstruction rather than betray a single wandering thought, urged him on to give his opinion and admiration of Randolph's gallant deed, entering herself into every martial detail, with that spirit, that animation which marked her connection with the glorious line of Bruce, and rendered her perhaps yet dearer to her kinsmen. It was a gay and spirit-stirring scene, that old hall, that joyous night, for the enthusiasm of every heart was stamped on every brow, and breathed in every word. There was much for king Robert to hear, much he bade them repeat again and yet again, and when every particular of that daring exploit was told, applause swelled so long and loud, the arched roof echoed with the sound.

“Aye, to Edinburgh we will go,” were the monarch's parting words that night. “Won by a patriot band, it shall henceforth be the capital of a patriot land, the dwelling of

patriot kings. To Randolph we will go, my fellow-soldiers, ourselves to give him the meed of glory he so well deserves. One cup to Scotland's glory, and then to the rest ye so well need." The pledge passed round, the king departed, followed by one simultaneous cheer, that in truth rung on his bold heart with a mighty sound, for it told of a kingdom's love.

CHAPTER XXXII.

A VERY few months after the capture of Edinburgh Castle sufficed to give the whole town an aspect of bustle and activity peculiarly grateful to its inhabitants, so long depressed and groaning 'neath the consciousness that as long as their proud citadel were in English hands, however they might share the privileges, the immunities of other citizens granted by King Robert, still they were not free. They had heard of castles falling, of even countrymen and peasants rising in arms, and had felt yet more keenly the desire and the impossibility of laying their castle, even as others, at the feet of the king. That was now accomplished; the proud banner of Scotland waved in majestic folds from the keep, Scottish soldiers crowded the walls, Scottish nobles frequented the city, and lastly, but more precious yet to Scottish hearts, their patriot king had fixed his resting there, and with imposing pomp and ceremony, at which every civil and military authority of the city officiated, proclaimed that fair town the capital of Scotland, the seat of royalty, the centre of all of art or science that might fling the lustre of her name to other lands, and shed increase of glory on her sons; and there were not wanting those, amid the thronging thousands that day congregated, to prophesy the future fame of that goodly town; that she would send forth from her walls not warriors alone, but men armed with the might of genius, the steady rays of philosophy, of learning; that, proclaimed thus the capital of a land *made* free, she would preserve her freedom through distant ages, and foster in her bosom all of worth and art and genius, that can exist but midst the free. King

Robert permitted not that enthusiasm to cool. Disorders that had crept in during the English bondage were rectified ; the public schools were rearranged on a sure footing ; encouragement afforded to artists of every grade, and all the blessings of peace and security took the place of outrage and of gloom. A new spirit dawned upon the town, lighting up its every nook and lowliest home with the beams of that sun which shines but for the free !

For a brief period the king of Scotland gave his undivided attention to the internal comfort and strength of his kingdom and people ; made repeated excursions from Edinburgh to other towns and districts ; arranged aught that might be disorderly, heightened all that was flourishing. Happiness and peace waited on his steps, and left their trace behind them. He saw that all of Scotland in his possession was secure ; that the castles and fortresses he had permitted to stand, as guardians of the country, were well seneschalled and garrisoned ; and thus, on his return to Edinburgh, he had leisure to form his plans for another expedition against England, which by internal conflicts was well-nigh torn asunder.

"Any service needed along the coast of Ireland, Sir Knight of the Branch ?" said Lord Edward Bruce, jocosely, meeting Sir Amiot in one of the antechambers of the castle, early in the June of the same year. "Know you I am going to change my services from a general's to an admiral's, and would ask your sombre worship to accompany me, did I imagine the request likely to be of any weight. Think you your fair charge—for I must deem her fair, as nought but a woman could hold a young knight so steadfast to his oath—think you, I say, there is a chance of finding her on some desert rock of the ocean, or wild tower on the Irish coast ? if so, give me charge concerning her."

"I thank your lordship for the kindly offer, but I have somewhat more hope for the fulfilment of my vow in accompanying King Robert to England ; were it other, I would gladly try my fortune on the seas. But for what go ye to Ireland ? whither and for what purpose seek you the treacherous deep ? Methought it were a service scarce active enough for Lord Edward Bruce."

"Why no, perchance not, were it not a pleasant change ; and Robert—I pray his grace's pardon—has a right to de-

mand of me what he pleases. I would lose my right hand in his service, and fight with my left for ever after, if it would pleasure him ; king as he is successful, more gloriously triumphant, there is not a spark of presumption about him ; he is all a brother still. For what purpose seek I the coast of Ireland, dost ask ? why, to levy tribute—gold for King Robert instead of King Edward—and I shall succeed, rest you assured."

"No doubt of it," answered Sir Amiot, laughing ; "Lord Edward Bruce, like his royal brother, has but to appear, and that which he wishes is done ; nay, it is no chivalric courtesy, my lord, thou knowest 'tis truth. For this English expedition, hast heard more concerning it—are the king's plans determined ?"

"I believe yea, or very nearly so, depending on the information expected by an express from England. He marches as soon after that information as possible. Our poor afflicted Agnes has so conjured him not to leave her behind again, that, somewhat unwisely, I think, he has promised compliance. On a predatory expedition like this, there is much risk and little convenience for females."

"For females—the Lady Agnes will not go there alone ?" Sir Amiot's heart throbbed as he spoke.

"No ; that madcap Isoline has not ceased tormenting to go too, declaring her desire to visit England was too ungovernable to be resisted. His grace has half consented, for the sake of Agnes, and partly to further his darling scheme."

"And what is this darling scheme ?"

"Now, art thou really so wrapt in thine own melancholy musings as not to know, nay, to see, for it is clear as crystal ? Does not Douglas go with you, and if Isoline still shunned him, as there was a time when we fancied she did, would she be so earnest in desiring to accompany the king ? No, no ; depend on it, she is beginning to be touched by his devotion, and wishes to watch his conduct in the field with her own eye, at least so King Robert argues, and it sounds well."

"And it is King Robert's darling wish to bring about this union ?" demanded Sir Amiot, with a huskiness of tone he endeavoured to conceal.

"Darling wish—why he would, I think, fight for his kingdom over again to bring it about, and make that little independent Isoline love Douglas as Douglas loves, and, what is more, deserves to be loved."

"And thinkest thou this will be? Does the Lady Isoline love—does she reciprocate his devotion?"

"Not a doubt of it; not a doubt but that it will be. Isoline was not at all likely to let him see his triumph too soon; she would rather keep him at bay—try him by coldness and pride, and all that sort of thing. But what was it for? simply to make her victory more complete, and use all her powers, ere she submitted them to him. I am not over-wise in reading woman's heart, but that's all clear enough."

"You think, then, she loves him now?"

"Undoubtedly I do. How could she remain untouched by such constant devotion as he has shown? and this desire to accompany King Robert to England confirms it."

"Truly, yes," replied Sir Amiot, with an effort, that to any other but Lord Edward Bruce must have been observable; then hastily changing the conversation, he said—

"Was there not some talk of an expedition to the Isle of Man? Does your lordship take it in your cruise, or will his grace make the attack?"

"If this expedition to England be attended with his usual success, the galleys will in all probability await him off the coast of Cumberland, and he will set sail thence with part of his army, leaving the rest to march leisurely to Scotland. But a word in your ear, Sir Amiot; Dundee and Rutherglen shall acknowledge Robert ere he return. I have set my heart on their reduction, and trust me for the deed."

"And Stirling?"

"All in good time. There shall remain no fortress in Scotland garrisoned by English, while Edward Bruce can wield a sword. Ha! Sir Henry Seaton; what news—whither go ye all, my lords?" he continued, as several noblemen entered the ante-room.

"To the king," was the reply. "The express from England has arrived, bringing important news. Gaveston is murdered."

"Ha! by my faith, important indeed. Poor wretch! so much for favouritism. Come, Amiot, we'll to the king

also," and putting his arm into the knight's, they followed the lords into the presence of the king.

The state of England was indeed startling. Torn by internal divisions, broken into two parties, one of which, consisting simply of Edward and his ill-fated favourite, struggled vainly against the overwhelming power of all the English aristocracy, up in arms to wash out the insolence and audacity of the upstart minion in his blood, the kingdom presented almost as fair a field for conquest as Scotland had done to the rapacious Edward of former years. Edward the Second had been compelled to fly northward before the arms of Lancaster, carrying his favourite with him, leaving him in the fortress of Scarborough, he himself marching to York, in the hope of raising forces sufficient to overawe Lancaster and his confederates. Before, however, this could be accomplished, Pembroke had besieged Scarborough, the slender garrison of which compelled Gaveston to surrender. He did so, however, on conditions, which, had they been adhered to, might have saved him from his horrible fate. Pembroke artfully eluded them, conducting him to the castle of Dedington, near Banbury; he there left him under but a slender guard, and departed on pretence of important business, but in all probability to counsel with the Earl of Warwick on measures afterwards adopted. Warwick, confident of success from Pembroke's intelligence, attacked the castle. The garrison made no resistance, but delivered up Gaveston into the hands of his enemies, who conducted him with all speed to Warwick Castle, and there Lancaster, Hereford, and Arundel instantly repaired. Hatred has little regard to law, and consequently without any reference to civil trial or military capitulation, the head of the favourite was struck off by the common executioner, without mercy or delay.

Incensed beyond all measure at this outrage to his favourite, vowing vengeance unlimited against its perpetrators, Edward was making preparations for war all over England, and no time therefore could be more favourable for King Robert's plans. The Scottish king had listened attentively and silently to this intelligence, expressing some pity both for Gaveston and Edward. His acute mind saw at once the favourable opportunity for farther conquests.

His plans were discussed freely and fully, and speedily arranged. Orders were given to collect and marshal his soldiers, to bring them under their several leaders towards the borders, there to unite into one compact close body, ready to penetrate in a south-westerly direction, towards Chester, to which place King Robert had resolved, despite of all opposition, to make his way.

"And now this weighty business accomplished," he said, perceiving some of the lords about to depart, "I would fain know if aught has been heard of Sir Alan Comyn in these English proceedings. Has that unhappy youth fallen a victim to favouritism, even as the presumptuous Gaveston? Can any one tell—is there any mention of his name?"

"Some speak of him as being still with Edward, his only surviving prop and consolation—the sweet-voiced traitor; and others say he shared Gaveston's fate, if so, the English have but taken justice out of our hands, and so God speed them."

"Peace, Seaton, peace," returned the king, somewhat sternly; "speak not so wrathfully of that poor misguided boy. The saints forefend that such should be his miserable fate; while he lives I may hope yet to clear this mystery."

"Mystery, what mystery?" fiercely interrupted Edward Bruce. "Is there aught of mystery in his public devotion to his country's bitterest foe? in the fact that the same lip which swore with such pretended emotion loyalty to Bruce, should forswear itself in similar vows to Edward? Mystery, that the craven should prefer riches, honour, security in an English court, to danger, poverty, privation in the camp of Bruce? Pshaw! there is little of mystery here."

"Edward, I tell you there is much, much. I will never believe that this came to pass freely and fairly; that boy had too much of his mother's spirit in him to draw back thus, and desert a cause he so nobly embraced."

"Embraced in his earliest youth, my gracious liege," rejoined Lennox. "Your highness's remembrance of that son of a rebellious house does indeed honour to thine heart, but trust me, will find no response in his youthful enthusiasm. The presence and counsels of his exalted mother might well occasion the bold loyalty he at first displayed; but parted

from that mother and that cause, her voice hushed, nay, perhaps her very existence hidden from him, in the very midst of a court noted for licentiousness and pleasure, made the pet and plaything of a luxurious monarch, is there mystery or marvel in this change? My liege, dismiss this misguided scion of the Comyn from your kindly thought; he is not worthy of the regret, the affection thus bestowed on him."

"Lennox, Lennox," answered the king, urgently, though mildly, "I doubt not the wisdom or experience of your maturer judgment, I would not do it wrong; yet, my friend, were this boy other than a Comyn, thinkest thou, thou wouldst thus quarrel with my feelings, my doubt of this strange tale? Answer me frankly—were Alan other than a Comyn, would not thy judgment be other than it is?"

"In sober truth, my liege, it would; but when we have had such bloody proofs of the Comyn's undying hatred to the Bruce, and treachery to Scotland—hatred from all who bear that name, from the serf to the lord, inciting not mere open warfare, but midnight assassination or poisoned meal, is it well, is it wise, to except one to the diabolical infamy of the line, because, before he mingled with them, he had seen and heard but loyalty, and fancied himself loyal? It is better perchance he is the traitor they proclaim him; it had been a bitter pang to him to feel himself alone of that base line. And by my knightly faith, I fear, even in this camp, in the very face of seeming loyalty and patriotism, he would have met mistrusters; that name, that blackened name, how could its bearer pass unquestioned?"

A low deep hum of assent passed through the lordly crowd at these words, betraying but too clearly how completely the sentiments of the aged nobleman were echoed by his fellows. Sir Amiot alone neither spoke nor moved. He was standing close beside, rather behind, the sovereign's chair, and his tall form partly shadowed by the drapery of a curtain; he had been the most eagerly animated of all who discussed the expedition to England, smoothing every difficulty advanced by others. None knew the effort it was to speak thus, or even if they had, none could have discovered its cause, little dreaming there could have been any-

thing in Lord Edward Bruce's blunt conference, to which alone the effort might be traced. The sudden start occasioned by the king's first words concerning Sir Alan Comyn was controlled so speedily and successfully, it escaped observation, and he resumed the post he was about leaving; glancing first at the sovereign and then on his nobles, and once or twice with difficulty restraining speech, he stood proudly, and yet more proudly erect; but his fellow-nobles were all too much engrossed in their own speculations to notice him.

The king had listened to the assenting voice with a painful expression of sadness on his noble features, then rousing himself, said, cheerfully, "Not with us, my good lords, not with us. I had no shadow of doubt as to the truth, the loyalty that ill-fated boy expressed; I should have honoured, trusted in him, aye, in the very midst of the dark treason of his line. Even now, did he return to me, acknowledge his error, swear renewed fidelity, I would, for his mother's sake, forgive and believe him. Still there is mystery, I say again; nay, there are times I believe his tyrant father, carried on by passion, did wreak his murderous vengeance on his son, and to disguise or conceal the horrible deed, has forged this tale. Laugh an ye will, my lords, at your monarch's incredulity, but till that boy be brought before me, and I see his own proper person, hear from his own lips this tale, I'll not believe it."

"Surely it were better for us to learn a lesson of your grace's noble charity than laugh at it," unexpectedly interposed Sir Amiot, speaking very slowly, as if under some restraint; "for my own part, my liege, I would fain think with thee."

"Because you know little of that false line from which the stripling springs, my good friend," answered Edward Bruce. "Did you know them as we do, you would think as we do, and marvel less at the benevolence and kindness with which his highness speaks, for that is natural, than at the want of wisdom such credulity implies. However he might trust that boy again, I should hold it my duty to prevent it, if by no other way, by the sharp steel."

"And I, and I, and I," responded many voices.

"Methought the Countess of Buchan bore such a name for loyalty and patriotism, her son might be judged more

kindly," continued Sir Amiot, still in that same guarded tone. "There are brave tales told of her."

"And rumour for once speak truth, and less than truth," replied Lord Edward, frankly; "she is a great, a good, a glorious woman! I would lose my left hand to-morrow, to gain her freedom. Had her son been still under her control, he would never have been the thing he is, nor I have doubted him, although his name be Comyn."

"But surely, my lord, that influence could have been of little worth so soon to pass away. Bethink thee, a mother hath great power, and he was not, I have heard, so young when they were parted."

"Right, Amiot, right!" exclaimed the king, as he rose to depart. "Beshrew me, thou hast spoken wisely, and somewhat more kindly of a stranger than these good knights, who knew and seemed to love him. Trust me, that mother's power will one day be proved. He is more a Duff than a Comyn, I'll be sworn, and if he be in Edward's court, 'tis not love that keeps him."

"Every man to his own thoughts, my royal brother," rejoined Edward Bruce, as the king courteously quitted the chamber; "thine are perchance those of a forgiving, mine of an avenging warrior. There was never yet a Comyn who was not enemy to the Bruce, whose blood showed not the same black poisonous stream, however mingled with a purer—and root and branch I'll sweep them from the earth."

He clenched his hand threateningly, and the dark scowl of vengeance gathered on his brow. There were many to join him in hatred of this race, in vowing their extermination. Others speculated a little longer on the real situation and politics of the young heir of Buchan, and others again eagerly returned to the exciting thoughts of an expedition into England, and so the assembly dispersed.

It was very late before Sir Amiot had concluded some military arrangements with his colleagues, and found himself quietly at his quarters. His couch was ready, his page in attendance, but there seemed no inclination on his part to avail himself of these comforts; he flung himself down on the first seat that presented itself, and covered his face with his hands. Malcolm looked at him with great surprise and some alarm; at length, "To England, my noble master;

think, at length we march to England," he said, half hesitatingly, half joyously. "And the Lady Agnes goes with us, to make our triumph the more complete."

"Triumph, what triumph?" demanded his master, suddenly looking up, but speaking in a tone so hollow, it presented a strange contrast to the page's joy.

"Nay, now, my lord, something must in truth have gone wrong for you to ask me this. Will it be no triumph when her freedom is won, no triumph when this disguise may be cast off, and you stand forth your own noble self?"

"Malcolm, Malcolm, cease, in mercy!" passionately escaped Sir Amiot, and he strode up and down the room as one wrung almost to frenzy. "I, too, once believed this would be a triumph, a glorious triumph; but now, now let me but gain her freedom, and lie down and die!"

"My lord—Sir Amiot!" exclaimed the page, and he gently took his master's burning hand. "Oh, you are ill, you must be, or you would not speak thus—gain her freedom and *die*! How would she bear this, she to whom thou art all in all?"

"She believes me dead; why undeceive her?" he answered, though he was evidently softened, for he sunk back into his seat, and the hand his page held trembled with emotion; "why undeceive her, when it will be but to see me scorned and shunned as a traitor, leagued with traitors? They have told me this, their own lips have sworn, root and branch, to exterminate the traitor line, and why, why should I escape? No, no, better die than bear this—she, she shall live to be happy. They have told her I am dead, and she has mourned for me as dead—she will now weep no more."

"But if they have told her the lie that rumour hath conveyed even here, the black, slanderous lie?"

"Malcolm, she'll not believe it—no; did an angel swear it. No, she would not wrong me thus!" exclaimed Sir Amiot, again starting up. "She would believe me dead, but not that black lie; not that even force hath made me villain. No, no, she'll not believe it!"

"She would not, would not, my noble master—in truth, she would not; and trust me, none else will, when she proclaims thee hers. When men remember years of fidelity, of courage tried in many a well-fought field, will they dare repeat these slanders? No, no, they judge thus because

they know nought of him whom they condemn. Gain but her freedom, and show thyself the noble being that thou art, that thou hast ever been."

"I would I had thy hopeful heart, my faithful Malcolm," replied his master, pausing in his hasty walk, and laying his hand caressingly on his young follower's shoulders; "but hadst thou heard all that I have, thou, too, wouldst feel that scarce could be. Well, well, let it be; my path lies onward, my vow is not yet fulfilled, and till it is, my heart must not fail me, even though 'tis crushed and bruised!"

"Do not speak so, my lord, think, only think we march to that land, to that very city where the foe holds her prisoner; her freedom must be, shall be gained."

Sir Amiot shook his head. "We have marched to that city before, my good boy, and marched from it and left her there; and hope was stronger then than it is now. Malcolm, my soul is deadened, hope hath no voice within."

"It is silent, that reality may be more joyous yet; oh, trust me, thy vow shall soon be accomplished, thy name be known, honoured, shouted aloud as the friend, not the foe of the Bruce, and then," he looked archly in Sir Amiot's face, "the Lady Isoline, my lord—"

"Will be the bride of Douglas," and Sir Amiot's voice grew stern with emotion. "Malcolm, speak not of her. King Robert gives his niece to Douglas, and she will be his bride."

"Douglas—the bride of Douglas," and the boy laughed long and lightly, though not disrespectfully; "an that is all thou fearest, good my lord, shake off the fancy as thou wouldst the nightmare of thy sleep. The bride of Douglas, that Lady Isoline will never be!"

"And wherefore not?" demanded Sir Amiot, roused, despite of himself?

"Simply because Lady Isoline will never marry, even to please King Robert, the man she loves not."

"And how knowest thou that she loves not Douglas?"

"How? never mind, my lord, but trust my eyes better than thine own. And now surely, your lordship will to rest; already I see the first gleam of morning."

Sir Amiot followed his advice, soothed and roused from his despondency, even to his own wonderment, by his page's eager words. It is strange how brightly and beautifully hope will

return to the human breast, even after she has seemed crushed and for ever. The knight would in truth have found it difficult to define wherefore his feelings had undergone so complete a change in so short an interval; why the buoyant hopefulness of the young Malcolm should so extend itself to him, when in truth it had but words, glowing words, no foundation on which to rest. Still he was young, though his peculiar situation had given him the sadness and experience of age, and Nature will sometimes speak when her voice has appeared hushed; and she spoke now, when Hope re-lit her torch—for it is youth, elastic springing youth, and youth alone to whom Hope is a guardian angel, a reviving spirit, unknown to maturer years. The deep wound the nobles so unconsciously had inflicted had turned his thoughts from other painful subjects, and the soothing of the first seemed to shed balm upon the last, though, alas! only for that one night; the next morning showing him Douglas ever at the Lady Isoline's bridle-rein but too vividly recalled the words of Lord Edward Bruce, and dashed his returning spirit with deeper gloom.

"Does the Lady Isoline know *whose* liberty you seek, my lord?" the page asked him, carelessly, on one of their daily marches southward.

"How can you ask? of course, no. My vow forbids, for if I breathe her name, I tell my own," was the reply. To which the page rejoined—

"Would that she did, my lord, for she is proud, and if she thinks—"

"Thinks what?" demanded his master, but the page had spurred off to finish his soliloquy elsewhere.

The movements of King Robert's army were, as usual, rapid and successful. Pouring down on the north of England from the Cheviot Hills, the country soon displayed the marks of his progress. Houses, castles, villages fell before the sweeping arms of the avengers, for so the soldiers now looked upon themselves, and gloried in the title.

Divided into two stout bands, the first, under command of the renowned Douglas and Randolph, made such rapid and triumphant way, that the second band, following more leisurely, appeared more like the quiet progress of a conqueror through an humbled soil, than the rear-guard of an advancing foe. In this band was the king, and with him his

niece, the Lady Isoline, whose high spirit gloried in the triumphs that she witnessed, to the utter exclusion of all personal thought of danger. Her safety, however, was but little endangered, for the English made no resistance, flying before the advancing armies, as if all dream of strife and war with such a foe were worse than futile. But Isoline was still a woman, though a daring one, and many a time did her benevolence, her tender thought, for the sorrowing and injured, soften the horrors of their fate, and bind them in chains of amity and kindness to their conquerors, inclining them of their own accord to terms of peace and friendship. She hovered, like a ministering angel, amidst the iron warriors composing her uncle's troops, excited and exciting, giving vent to all the natural resolution of her character; looking on the skilful manœuvre, the sagacious march with an eye, clear, intelligent, as any of those whose trade was war; a mind pleased and interested, yet never losing one atom of the delicacy, the refinement, the dignity, the gentleness of her sex, never intruding a remark which might be deemed unwomanly. She was in truth a lovely specimen of woman in the chivalric era; one uniting in herself every quality that could fascinate a soldier either in the battle-field or tented bower, and hold him there a willing prisoner to her power. Few, indeed, who gazed on her, imagined how large a share of woman's peculiar feelings lay shrined in that little heart; that even now, while every word breathed energy, every glance spoke fire, or softened into sympathy with all who needed it, there were thoughts and pains within, which perchance had bowed some others of her sex even to the earth, or wrapped them up in selfish musing and unquiet gloom. If any dream of a mood too masculine entered an observer's soul, he had but to look on her with the afflicted Agnes, to mark how soothingly and fondly she would forget all else to tend and to careen her, and the dream would vanish quicker than it came.

There was a change too in the temperament of Agnes, which this expedition had made perceptible. The wild, wayward fancies of childhood which had characterized her wanderings in Scotland now gave way much more often to a loftier mood;—a spirit sometimes approaching inspiration, sometimes so nearly resembling perfect sanity, that it would rouse eager hopes in the breast of both her sovereign and

Isoline, aye, and in another, too, who loved her none guessed how dearly; but his hopes were mingled with fears, for every time she appeared more than usually conscious, less engrossed with inward fancies, Sir Amiot seemed intuitively to perceive the frame grew weaker and more fragile; and while he longed, he dreaded to behold return of mind.

Occupying a high station near the person of his king, Sir Amiot's opportunities of associating with Isoline were more frequent than satisfactory. She did not avoid, but she did not invite his attention and devotion as she had at first; and he, believing there was more truth in Lord Edward's words concerning her love for Douglas than he chose to own even to himself, and feeling too that he could have no claim upon her, that even if her heart were disengaged, how might he, a nameless adventurer wrapt in mystery, hope for a place within it?—he, too, kept aloof, seeking, how vainly may be imagined, to keep his heart and thoughts fixed on the object he once hoped would alone engross them—the liberation, the happiness of one who, until he beheld Isoline, had reigned without a rival in his love. Through lingering years he had struggled on for Scotland, yet coupled with his soul's desire for her freedom was a yet dearer object, his daily thought, his nightly dream; when the darkness of despondency gathered thickly around him on the battlefield, that object sustained him still; and though perchance he cared but little for his life, that life was not his own, he had vowed it unto her, and that vow should be fulfilled. He looked to but one spot in the future—her liberation; the rest was all a blank, to be filled up he knew not, cared not how. Though not always had he thought thus, there had been a time when young ambition looked to that liberation as but the sunrise of glory, as the opening of a long vista of radiant gladness, in which fame, love, honour, all had had gleesome resting; but years had stolen on that boyhood's dream, with all the sickness of hope deferred, and though that object was still the life, the pivot of his being, his visioned future now ever ended with its attainment.

King Robert gained his daring purpose. The ancient city of Chester was not only reached, but, as if in reckless challenge of the English power, but a few weeks he en-

camped there, receiving deputations from the four northern counties entreating peace, and, following the example of the Bishopric of Durham, whose capital city had been stormed in one night, offered the sum of two thousand marks for redemption from further attack, and solemnly entering into an engagement with the Bruce, which granted him the privilege of marching through their territories whenever he wished to make war on England. This was too eligible an offer to be refused. The king accepted it, far more as a tacit acknowledgement of his power, than with any present idea of availing himself of it; and, in consequence, when he had given his army sufficient rest, retraced his steps northward, with as little molestation as if he had been making a progress through his own kingdom. Encamping again at Hartlepool, he thence dispatched Douglas with half his army to Carlisle, in the hope of reducing that city to obedience, determining himself to attempt that of Berwick, which still resisted the Scottish arms. For this purpose he did not remain very long at Hartlepool, but departed, taking with him most of his army, leaving only a small but steady troop, under command of Sir Amiot, to follow more leisurely with Isoline and Agnes, whom he left under that knight's especial care.

It was on the evening of the fourth day's march from Hartlepool that Sir Amiot found himself for the first time riding abreast with the Lady Isoline, at such a distance from his soldiers, who were surrounding the litter of Agnes, that they were comparatively alone. It was perhaps strange this had not occurred before, for the lady had certainly not appeared to avoid him, but it so happened that a group of young officers had generally joined Sir Amiot and his charge at the head of the cavalcade. This evening, however, Lady Isoline had expressed a wish to explore a wild picturesque path, leading down from the main road. Sir Amiot had accompanied her, and on returning to the line of march, about a mile farther, they found themselves much ahead of their followers.

"And amidst all the castles, convents, towns, and cities that have acknowledged King Robert's power, can it be your object is still unattained, sir knight, or have you wearied of the hope, and wait till chance effect it?" Isoline inquired, after the conversation had continued for some time in an

animated strain on King Robert's triumphant progress, and other chivalric topics.

"Wearied of my hope? no lady, I had wearied of my life sooner," was his somewhat mournful answer. "It is indeed ever fading, but can never wholly depart. I did look to this expedition to bring it nearer; that in some castle in our way I might find the captive whom I seek. I hoped Edward's policy had not retained her so many years in the weary durance in which his father's tyranny had placed her; but if she be still there—which now I say heaven grant she be—I still hope, for Berwick is our destination."

"Berwick! Have you certain intelligence, then, the captive you seek is there? Think you not it is more probable, an she be of the rank and power you describe, she shares the imprisonment of the Queen of Scotland and her train?"

"It may be," replied the knight, musingly; "perchance it is, and yet Edward must indeed be contrary to his father, an he grant her such honourable keeping. I speak in seeming mystery, lady; would, would it were not so, that in thy kindly ear I might pour forth a tale which, simple as in reality it is, mystery hath turned to marvel."

"I would there were no mystery, for thine own sake, sir knight," replied the lady kindly. "'Trust me, thou hast mine earnest wishes for its speedy dissolution."

"And blessing on thee, lady, for that kind tone!" answered Sir Amiot, passionately. "Oh, lady, I deemed my vow of easy keeping, that I should scarce wish more than liberty to fight under King Robert's banners, and thus obtain its fulfilment; but since I have known thee, oh, my heart hath throbbed and burned to cast aside this shrouding guise and tell thee I am free; that, spite of poverty, of a name, that when spoken may perchance fling down an eternal barrier between its bearer and the Bruce—despite of these, I am free, unshackled—free to offer unto thee the lowly homage thy nobleness demands—free to, to—"

"Nay, sir knight, I pray thee a truce to chivalry," said Isoline, at the same moment causing her palfrey to spring forward, to enable her to control a sudden emotion, she knew not whether of pleasure or of pain; "I wish companionship, not homage now, Sir Amiot, and to a graver subject—what

thinkest thou of the Lady Agnes? the change in her can scarce have passed thee unobserved?"

"It has not, lady; I see it with joy yet trembling, for I fear me the frame will scarce have strength to sustain the sudden weight of mind restored."

"Thinkest thou so, indeed? alas! how may we then desire its return. Her innocence, her childlike purity so endear her, that I cannot think of losing her without a pang, though by herself death would be hailed with joy."

"Death—oh, speak it not; she must not, she shall not die yet!" fell from Sir Amiot's lips, in tones that at once deadened the sudden elasticity with which a moment before Isoline's spirit had leaped up. "She is a being so beautiful, so loveable in her affliction—oh! who is there can look on her and not love? and to me—oh, what is she not to me!"

He paused abruptly, conscious how contradictory and strange his words must seem; but it was too late, they were spoken, though he would have given worlds to recall them. He glanced on the face of Isoline, a grave inquiring look had usurped the place of the playfulness resting there before; he felt its expression one almost of contempt, and his spirit absolutely writhed beneath that self-inflicted pang. At that moment, perhaps fortunately for both, as neither seemed inclined to renew the conversation, an officer spurred on from the troop.

"There is mischief afoot, Sir Amiot!" he exclaimed. "Gave not King Robert positive orders that neither city, castle, nor convent should be injured or even threatened in this northward march?"

"He did; who has dared disobey?" and Sir Amiot was once again the steady soldier, his whole attention given to his charge.

"I scarcely know, save that some of our men have observed a band of marauding borderers hovering about these districts, and overheard some intimation of an attack on the Convent of Our Lady of Mount Carmel, lying somewhere in this direction. There is smoke rising yonder, and methought sounds as of attack and wailing were borne towards us on the wind. Will it please you I should ride forward?"

"Halt a moment, Fitz-Ernest; my authority perchance will be needed. Will it please you, lady, to accept the escort of Sir Ronald St. Clair, and permit my riding for-

ward? it were scarce safe for you to encounter this wild band, checked as they will be in their pillage, and yet I must see to the maintenance of the king's commands." The lady calmly signified her assent, and Sir Amiot, hastily informing his colleague of his intention, and entreating him to bring his fair charge leisurely forward to their night quarters, which lay in the direction of the convent, divided his band, and galloped forward with a hundred men. It was rapidly approaching dusk, but some faint sounds of tumult proved an unerring guide, until smoke and flames marked the site of the village round the convent, which was situated on one of the Cheviot Hills. The suddenness of Sir Amiot's appearance, the strength and skill with which his strong-armed band bore down on the border plunderers, speedily forced them to give way, and compelled them at the sword's point to acknowledge and give instant obedience to the written mandate of the king. Leaving fifty of his men to endeavour to quench the flames and keep the peace, Sir Amiot rushed up the steep, informed by his prisoners below, that their strongest band was there employed in the sacking of the convent. The oaken doors of the church had been broken down, and already was there a rude band employed in tearing the gold and silver ornaments from the shrines, with oaths and horrid laughter desecrating that solemn edifice, accustomed only to the voice of prayer. A moment sufficed for Sir Amiot to notice this, and also that, grouped in various attitudes, stood, knelt, and crouched the holy sisters around the altar, the abbess and one or two others alone standing erect in lofty and undaunted composure; the former boldly addressing the rude plunderers and commanding them to desist, or dread the thunders of the Church.

"Hold your reverend tongue, good mother of wisdom, and let us to our work. We never molest unless we are molested, so best let us work in peace."

"In peace, sacrilegious villains, aye, in such peace as King Robert grants to all such thieves!" was the fierce and unexpected answer received, as, some on horseback, some on foot, their iron heels clattering fearfully on the stone pavement, Sir Amiot's loyal band rushed in. There was a brief, sharp struggle; but taken by surprise, conscious of their liability to the severity of King Robert's law, most of

the plunderers fled in confusion, glad enough to escape the swords of their countrymen, or, what was perhaps worse to them, captivity. Some fled to the mountains, others to the village, and there shared the fate of their companions; but in a very brief interval all trace of their purpose was lost, save in the smoking ruins of the hamlet, the disordered state of the church, many of whose beautiful images lay shivered on the floor, and the still lingering terror of the nuns, which neither the example nor the exhortations of the abbess could in any degree assuage.

"Away, Sir Thomas Keith; take some of the men, and search well round the convent. I fear me, those irreverend ruffians will elude us yet, and do some further mischief. Place a strict watch around, and do you, Walter, draw off the remaining men; we do but terrify these holy ladies. I fear me ye have suffered much, reverend mother," continued the young knight, turning with respectful courtesy towards the altar, and doffing his helmet; "I pray you lay no blame to the score of good King Robert; this outrage is against his express commands, and will draw down his just vengeance on its perpetrators."

"Nay, we ask not vengeance," replied the venerable abbess; "it is enough your courage, young man, and that of your companions, under Him, whose instruments you are, has saved us from this evil; we have suffered merely the effects of terror, which will speedily be calmed. Retire, my daughters, each one to her cell, and pour forth your several thanksgivings, till the church be once more ready to receive our general praise; surely we need it, for the mercy has been signal. Sister, you are ill, overcome," she added, hastily, as a deep, heavy sigh, almost a sob, was heard to escape from a tall, dignified-looking female, closely veiled, and dressed in the black, shrouding robes of those inmates of the convent who were under its rules and discipline, though, from some unknown cause, had not taken the vows. The church was almost all in gloom, but the lamps burning on the altar gave the knight a full view of this shrouded figure, on whom his eyes had unconsciously been fixed, even while the abbess spoke. Perceiving that her agitation, from whatever cause it sprung, rather increased than diminished, compelling her to seek the support of a seat, Sir Amiot, with the kindly feeling peculiarly natural

to him, flew to seek some water, and then it was the stranger raised her head, and finding herself almost alone with the abbess, murmured in tones that, though low, were absolutely thrilling in their richness—

“The voice of my country, and in such sweet tones! oh, holy mother, thy calm and gentle heart cannot know what they are to me—and the glance of that dark eye, though I could see no other feature, oh, what could it be, to bring back memory so vividly, till the dead seemed to rise again and live? Pity me, pray for me, holy mother; I knew not how weak my brain had grown.”

“Alas! my daughter, thou hast borne so much, no marvel that even so slight a thing as the voice of thy country should unnerve thee now. Imprisoned so cruelly, imprisoned for so many years, tortured in mind through so many causes, oh, I am not so withered in brain and senseless in heart as not to feel how much need thou hast for our prayers; but our God is merciful, my sister, trust in Him still.”

The lady bowed her head in resignation, and Sir Amiot returning at that instant, she accepted the courteously-offered draught with a silent but expressive gesture of thanks, then rising, took the arm of one of the nuns, and slowly departed, leaving Sir Amiot with his eyes still riveted upon her, he knew not wherefore. He was aroused by the abbess again addressing him.

“We would fain offer you something more substantial than mere thanks, young knight,” she said. “I fear those ravagers have done sad havoc among our poor people, yet perchance there are still farmers enow to give your companions good fare and lodging at our sole charge. We grieve that the rules of our order prevent our offering yourself and your brother knights the hospitality that inclination prompts; but a few yards below there, to the east of our convent gates, is a small fraternity of monks, who will gladly give ye all ye need.”

Sir Amiot frankly accepted the hospitality so offered, adding, that he would draw on her kindness yet more by beseeching a lodging in the convent for the ladies of whom he had the charge, as their residence elsewhere might almost be considered unsafe, from the borderers who had fled, and who were perhaps likely to attempt some annoyance from

their having been so thwarted in their intended outrage. The abbess expressed pleasure in having it in her power to afford this protection, and the knight departed to despatch a speedy messenger to Sir Ronald St. Clair, telling him all that had chanced, and desiring him to conduct his fair charge without delay to the convent, which, only five miles from their intended quarters, presented a secure and comfortable asylum, well worth the additional fatigue. The rank and name of the Lady Isoline, and also all that was absolutely necessary to be imparted concerning the peculiar situation of the Lady Agnes Bruce—for she now only bore her husband's name—were told to the abbess, and Sir Amiot sending forward his brothers-in-arms to the small monastery pointed out, himself mounted his horse and rode back to meet his charge.

"Is my sister well enough to join us in the refectory, or will she take her meal alone?" inquired the abbess, entering the chamber of the lady before mentioned, the effects of whose emotion had prevented her joining the sisters in the general thanksgiving which had been offered up directly after Sir Amiot's departure.

"Nay, indulge not my weakness by the offer, holy mother," was the reply, with a calm, quiet smile; "your wholesome rules must not be infringed by me, who am in truth but your prisoner."

"Say rather our esteemed and honoured guest, despite the fearful feuds between our several countries," answered the abbess, gently. "We have taken little interest in this unhappy war, save to pray God to direct and bless the right, whichever side it be; but for thee, my daughter, we can feel much. We have guests, Scottish guests, this night, and therefore I would fain spare thee further pain; an thou canst look on them and speak with them without emotion, be it so; but an thou fearest the trial, remain here, with my blessing on thee still."

"I know not now how far I may trust myself, holy mother," replied the stranger; "once I knew not the very name of weakness, and could ever exercise control. But tell me, who may be the Scottish guests? I may perchance know them too well for composure in their presence, and then I had best be absent."

"King Robert's niece, the Lady Isoline Campbell, with

her poor afflicted friend the Lady Agnes Bruce, and some three or four attendants."

"Lady Agnes Bruce! Who, what is she? I remember no such name," the lady said, somewhat abruptly, starting up as she spoke.

"The widow, Sir Amiot tells, of the youngest brother of the Bruce, the beautiful and accomplished Nigel, one of the earliest victims in this bloody war. Sancta Maria! my sister, what have I said?"

She might well ask, for the stranger had fallen back in her chair, so utterly prostrated by sudden emotion, as with difficulty to retain her senses, and recall them sufficiently for speech.

"And knowest thou who she was ere she became the wife of Nigel?" she asked, in a low, gasping tone, laying her trembling hand on the arm of the abbess. "No; the knight did not tell thee, then I will. The wife of the noble Nigel was the Lady Agnes Comyn, daughter, sole daughter of Isabella of Buchan—the wretched, lonely Isabella."

"Alas! alas! my daughter, if it be so, how mayest thou bear to hear of her affliction?" responded the venerable abbess, flinging her aged arms round the bowed and drooping form, with an emotion little in accordance with her passionless features and sacred function.

"Affliction—what affliction? In mercy, tell me!"

Briefly and carefully as she could the abbess narrated all she had heard from the knight. For awhile, the stranger listened with that fearful calm of feature betraying intense mental suffering, but gradually it softened, and tears fell fast and unrestrainedly, and partially relieved her.

- "I ought to be thankful for learning even this, for having the agonized hopes and doubts of weary years solved even thus," she said, "and I will after a brief while; but to think on that mind overthrown—that lovely, that angelic mind; to picture suffering such as hers, and apart from a mother's love. Oh, holy mother, 'tis a bitter pang, and it must have way; but can I not see her, look on her?" she continued, clasping her hands in sudden hope, then dropping them despairingly. "Alas! we have both forgotten the condition on which I am here. What have I pledged myself to Edward? tell me, oh tell me, for my brain refuses thought!"

"In truth I had forgotten it, my daughter, yet I know

not if it bear on this: to associate with no children of Scotland who might by chance enter here, lest your person be discovered, and force used on King Robert's part to give you freedom; to hold no communication, either personally or by the agency of another, with your friends in Scotland; to reveal yourself to none, lest measures be taken for your liberty, over which, in the present distracted state of the kingdom, his highness can have no control. Indeed, I had forgotten this, holding you but as a dear and cherished guest."

"But I must not forget [it]," replied the lady, with a dignity of mien and firmness of tone which at once betrayed the mental struggle was passed. "I may not hazard recognition. The Lady Isoline was in truth but a child when we last met, yet she may not have forgotten. And Agnes, my poor afflicted one—oh, no, no! better sacrifice the longing wish to gaze once more on her sweet face—perchance I could not bear to feel myself unknown, unrecognized by her—her, my own; but I must not speak thus. Tell me, oh, tell me, where she sleeps. I may look on her there, though the voice for which my heart has so yearned may be silent, the light of those lovely eyes concealed. It were indeed bliss to hear somewhat of my country, of my king, my friends, to speak with Isoline—but no, it must not be, I will not think of it. Holy mother, let me but see my Agnes when she sleeps, I ask no more."

"And thou shalt, thou shalt, my daughter; would that I might give thee more, but thou wouldst not take it were it offered; it were but torturing thy noble spirit, and tempt thee to forget its pledge. I leave thee, daughter; the Holy Virgin bless and comfort thee."

The lady bowed her head before her venerable friend, and as the door closed on the retreating form, she sunk on her knees in prayer. Oh, not with us is the power of touching on the wild chaos of thought which she sought, in deep and lowly earnestness, to pour before her God. We may not lift the veil from that bleeding heart—true, faithful, noble; still rising purer and purer, if possible, from every trial which bowed it for the moment to the earth.

It was past midnight, and all in the convent was hushed; but there were thoughts at work in the heart of Isoline, banishing sleep so effectually, as to cause a feeling almost

of envy at the quiet slumber—soft, dreamless as a child's—which closed the eyes of Agnes. They shared the same apartment, but the couch of Isoline occupied a recess, some distance from that of Agnes, and almost concealed by drapery. Knowing they were to depart early in the morning, Isoline had not entirely disrobed, and she now lay vainly courting repose, and, as is often the case, her nerves so strung, that the least sound startled them. She fancied a light footstep traversed the chamber, in a contrary direction to the usual door of entrance; her heart beat thick with undefined dread, but struggling with the feeling, she sat up and looked round. A female figure was kneeling beside the couch of the sleeping Agnes, shrouded in drapery except her head, from which, as if in the eager haste of her movement, the hood had fallen off, and exposed at once her expressive features, the peculiarly fine shape of her head, and the rich black hair, which even sorrow and care had not yet touched with grey; she was very much in the shade, but still there was something in the form of the head, in the attitude, in the intensity of her gaze on the beautiful sleeper, that riveted the attention of Isoline almost to pain. She watched her intently, she saw her bend over Agnes, and lightly removing the long soft hair which partially concealed her face, look upon it with a depth, an intensity of love, that Isoline could not remark unmoved; minutes rolled by, and still she moved not, gazing as if her eye would print those features on her heart. Mournfulness mingled with the love, as if there was a change on that face only too visible, spiritualizing its expression, till it seemed as if that gazer could scarce believe it a face of earth, for once or twice she bent down anxiously, Isoline fancied to listen if she breathed. Her lips were pressed lightly on the brow, cheek, and lips of the sleeper, and her form shook as with the effort to restrain a sob, and then she bent her head on her hands as she knelt, and Isoline knew that she was weeping. A sudden thought—becoming conviction on the instant it flashed before her—caused Isoline to spring from her couch and dart across the chamber, till she stood close beside that kneeling form; but she was unobserved, unheard, and she could not speak to disturb that holiness of love. Again the stranger rose, again she looked on Agnes, and pressed her lips to her brow, and lingered, as if she had not strength

to turn away, then, as with a powerful effort, she moved hastily from the couch, and her full face and form were exposed to the eyes of Isoline; the stranger started and endeavoured to draw her hood closely over her features, but with all the enthusiasm of her nature, Isoline in an instant had flung herself before her, had clasped her knees, exclaiming, in tones only checked from fear of disturbing the sleeper, "Oh, do not leave me, lady, without one word; my mother's friend—friend of my whole race, of my country—speak to me. Oh, what joy to my sovereign to know that we have met!"

The Countess of Buchan—for wherefore should we conceal that it was her?—hastily and affectionately raised the maiden, then clasping her in a warm embrace, gently led her farther from the couch of Agnes, and said, "Thy memory is better than I deemed it, my sweet Isoline. I believed thou, too, hadst slept, or even the blessing of gazing on my child had been denied me."

"Denied thee," repeated Isoline; "alas! wherefore? Why, if they told thee we were here, didst thou not seek us before? But thou wilt away with us, wilt thou not? thou wilt not rest here? Oh, why dost thou look so sad?—is it impossible—art thou still a prisoner? it cannot be."

"My child, 'tis even so; my word has passed, and were King Robert and all his kingdom before these convent gates, they could not give me freedom, till Edward says 'be free.' I may not hold commune with thee, Isoline, blessed as 'twould be. I have heard that Robert is indeed a king; that my beloved Scotland is free. I have seen my child, my own sweet Agnes, and I must ask no more. I have pledged myself to shun all intercourse with the children of my country; and oh, my sweet girl, thou must not tempt me with those pleading looks, I am not what I was."

"But force of arms, of victory—the whole north of England hath bowed itself at King Robert's feet; can he not claim thee, then, as his lawful prize?"

"Alas! no, my child, for it is against such a contingency my word has been pledged; without thus revealing myself, King Robert nor any of my friends could know my retreat. More than once already my residence has been changed, because of visits, either in peace or war, from the

Scotch, and that Edward has either doubted my word or imagined chance might effect my discovery. There are rumours of another change, but earnestly I trust they have no foundation, for I have met with warmer spirits, kindlier feelings here than I dared hope for or expect."

"Then my uncle, my mother even may not know of this. Oh, do not burden me with such a secret, lady," entreated the ardent Isoline, clinging closer to her? "Oh, you know not how we love thee still; how all in King Robert's court and camp pronounce with reverence thy name; how thy bold deed hath marked thee foremost midst the first and noblest of our country's patriots. The very rumour that thy cruel thralldom is at an end, that at least thou art comparatively at peace and rest from all torture save restraint, would be such blessing to so many."

"Would it, indeed, my Isoline? am I still thus remembered, or is it but thine own loving heart that speaks? Oh, thou hast indeed blessed me with these words; they will cheer my desolate heart; they will picture brighter dreams than I dared to look on, even at the thought of freedom. But I must not, dare not linger, sweet one, though my full heart knows not how to tear itself from thee and from my Agnes—my own, my precious child, and now, alas! my only one." Her voice, which had breathed more hope, more happiness in her first words than she herself could have believed possible from so slight a cause, sunk with the last so painfully, that it seemed as if days not years had passed away since her supposed bereavement. Isoline started; was she not aware of her son's existence, or did she speak thus, discarding him from her affections on account of his treachery, his alienation from his country? was patriotism indeed so much stronger than maternal love? She looked on the face of the countess, and felt it could not be. Something on her countenance aroused her companion's attention, and convulsively grasping her hand, she wildly exclaimed, "Isoline, Isoline, thou knowest something of my boy! Oh, speak to me, in mercy! he is with King Robert—he is not dead!"

"With King Robert—alas! no, dearest lady. But hast thou not heard—have they not told thee?"

"Heard—told me—torture me not with these meaningless words! say but that he lives."

"'Tis said, indeed, he lives, sweet lady, not for Scotland now, but as the petted minion of King Edward, the most devoted of that monarch's court."

"Isoline, they speak false!" replied the countess, in a tone that, suppressed as it was, almost electrified the hearer, it was so changed from the desponding sorrow of a minute before; "they speak false! my boy is dead, and this is all thou knowest; they have sought before to pour such poison in my ear, but I heeded them not, for I know that it is false. My child is dead, slain by a father's mandate, and thus, thus would he conceal his crime, and stain my angel Alan's name. And thou tellest me this—thou, daughter of Isabella's dearest friend, niece of him to whom my boy, with tears of shame at his line's disgrace, did swear his faith. Oh, how may it be my name is revered as thou sayest, and yet this foul tale believed?"

"Not by King Robert, lady; he holds it false, believing it as thyself a base invention framed to hide a father's crime, or else that force, not love, compels the course of action he pursues."

"And blessings on him for that thought!" resumed the countess, softened almost to tears; "but no force would compel him thus. Perpetual imprisonment, chains, torture, death, would rather be his choice, and it has been; for he is dead, I know that he is dead," and her head for a moment sunk on the shoulder of her deeply sympathising companion. "This must not be," she said at length. "It is sad to feel how utterly my mental strength has gone; it is well for me thou only art its witness, Isoline. Love me, pray for me, sweet girl; we may meet perchance in happier times, unless, indeed, my freedom be effected by a higher king than Robert, and my spirit join my child's. I need not bid thee love and cherish my poor Agnes—thou must, or thou wouldst leave her to other care than thine."

"Dear to me, cherished, tended as my own sister she is, sweet lady; aye, has been and will be, while she lives, trust me for her," replied Isoline, fervently.

"I do trust thee, my child, aye, and bless thee for that love. May heaven's choicest blessing shield you both!" she folded Isoline fondly to her bosom as she spoke. "And now farewell; forget that we have met, yet love me, dearest, till we meet again."

"And the king," inquired Isoline, gently detaining her, as she turned again to the couch of her child, "must he indeed know nought of this? He deems thee still enthralled in Berwick's cage, and grieves that one who did for him so much should still pine 'neath tyranny."

The countess paused in thought.

"Let him not grieve for this," at length she said, "nor spend his strength in the vain hope of reducing Berwick's impregnable fortress for my release. Tell him, an thou wilt, that we have met, that I am in comparative peace, but bound by stronger chains than iron to remain a prisoner till he effect my liberation by other means than force; yet let it not be publicly said that I am here, for my instant change of abode will be the consequence, and that would give me pain. Now, once more farewell, dearest. Speak of me to thy mother, tell her I love her still."

She gently withdrew herself from Isoline's passionate embrace, and bent once again over Agnes, who still slept calmly, undisturbed by those whispering voices; again she printed a long, light kiss on that pale, beautiful brow, and, without venturing another glance, glided from the chamber silently as she came.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

A BUSTLING scene to the quiet inmates of the convent did the courtyard of our Lady of Mount Carmel present soon after dawn the following morning. Sir Amiot had drawn up his men in marching array, ready to do honour to his fair charge, and their glittering spears and radiant armour, their waving plumes and flying banners, the prancing and neighing chargers, all presented a scene of life, which its extreme novelty rendered peculiarly charming. Sir Amiot had suggested that a band of fifty picked men, under an experienced officer, should remain quartered in the village, lest the border plunderers should return, a suggestion the abbess gratefully accepted, herself and several of the elder sisters escorting the Lady Isoline and her companions to the gateway, where their palfreys stood. Eagerly Sir Amiot scanned the holy sisters longing, he knew not wherefore, to

look once more on the shrouded figure whose agitation had been so marked, but he saw her not. As his band wheeled slowly round the mountain, and he himself tarried, helmet in hand, to speak some courteous parting words to the abbees, his farewell bow was slightly disturbed in its grace by his eye catching, or fancying that it caught, that same noble form at an upper window, watching the progress of the soldiers. The question "Who is she?" hovered on his lips, but he checked it as an idle curiosity, and galloped after his men.

The remainder of their journey to Berwick passed without incident. The Lady Isoline appeared little inclined for conversation, and kept closer to the litter or palfrey of Agnes, and Sir Amiot, though burning with impatience to clear himself in her eyes from all appearance of mystery or inconsistency, felt the impossibility of so doing too painfully, to venture intruding on her presence or attention unasked, and therefore little or no conversation of any moment passed between them, and their farther progress to Berwick was about as unsatisfactory, in consequence of this mutual reserve, as may well be imagined.

All was military bustle around Berwick. Operations had already begun, though it was rumoured that King Robert, perceiving the immense strength and impregnability of the fortress, somewhat hesitated as to the wisdom of wasting time and force on its reduction. That the Countess of Buchan was still supposed to be imprisoned there was the greatest if not the only cause of the king's determination to pursue the siege. The cage was still visible from the turret; but though it appeared empty, it was generally believed throughout the army that the countess had been only removed to mislead her friends, and cause them to raise the siege, and in all probability she was still in the same fortress, but in a more secluded prison.

Much surprised, then, were the troops when, about a fortnight after Sir Amiot and his charge rejoined them, the king publicly announced his determination to give up Berwick, at least for the present, send the greater part of his army to the aid of Sir Edward Bruce, who, returning successful from levying the Irish tribute, was then engaged in reducing every English-garrisoned fortress in Scotland to obedience, and march himself in a south-westerly

direction to the sea-shore, where the galleys, sent by his brother, awaited him for the proposed expedition against the Isle of Man, whose governor, a branch of the hated house of Lorn, had several years previous treacherously and basely betrayed two brothers of the Bruce, Thomas and Alexander, into the hands of Edward.

Douglas had been successful in forcing Carlisle to terms, compelling its seneschal to pledge himself to peace with Robert, and make no disturbance when the Scottish troops marched southward. On these conditions he was permitted to retain his office, and the castle remained nominally Edward's. This accomplished, Douglas was to march his troops northward, at the same time that the king proceeded south, meet him at the destined port, and proceed with him to the Isle of Man. Isoline and Agnes, under the care of Randolph, were to return to Scotland.

The real though secret cause of the king's determination to leave Berwick had been confided in a small, private council of the highest nobles and warriors of his realm, at which, strange to say, the Lady Isoline was present. Nothing, however, publicly transpired, except the fact of their return to Scotland, a determination occasioning a disappointment to some of the most ardent, who had looked to nothing less than the complete downfall of Berwick, although the more numerous were satisfied that if King Robert's resolution, it must be a wise one. Sir Amiot, however, who had not been one of the above-mentioned council, being absent on some temporary mission from the king, on his return appeared so thunderstruck by the intelligence as to occasion the extreme surprise of his companions. Seeking the monarch's tent, he told him he had resolved to ride round the walls of the fortress, attended only by his page; ask a question, and receive an answer of the principal warder, and on his knee he besought the king to grant him permission for the accomplishment of his wish. Robert remonstrated, gently reproved the knight-errantry of the engagement as tending more to foolhardihood than real courage, but was at length compelled to yield, convinced, by the earnest manner of the knight, that some important though unexplained cause originated his resolve.

Great was the excitement this decision of Sir Amiot

occasioned, particularly among his immediate colleagues, ardent and far more joyous than himself, many of whom longed to share his risk; but there was one person in the camp to whom it was a subject of most serious alarm.

"Can it be, that the wise, the moderate, the prudent Chevalier of the Branch is about to risk his life thus foolishly?" was the unexpected address of the Lady Isoline Campbell to Sir Amiot, as they chanced to meet in the sovereign's tent.

"Trust me, noble lady, my life, worthless as it is, save to her whose liberty I seek, is in no danger; yet do not scorn my grateful thanks for thy gentle counsel," replied Sir Amiot, in a tone that, despite all her efforts to the contrary, thrilled only too softly on her heart. "I told thee, noble lady, I looked to Berwick for the fulfilment of my hopes, the restoration of the prisoner I seek, and in that, restoration of my name. Can I see these hopes prostrated, crushed by this unexpected resolution of his highness, without one effort, even if it risk my life or liberty, to have them solved? Oh, lady, thou knowest not Amiot, an thou thinkest this could be."

"And how may this wild plan assist thee?" inquired Isoline, with a softened expression in feature and tone, which gave him courage to proceed.

"I know not—in truth, I cannot know; but it is worth the trial. Oh, if she be still there, still the prisoner of Edward's wrath, night and day will I kneel before King Robert, beseeching him to turn not from this spot till yon proud citadel be gained, or its prisoners delivered up ransomless and free. If she be not," his voice sunk into utter despondency, "then I must turn again unto my weary path, hoping against hope, striving against time; knowing so little of her fate, that I may be seeking one who is not, dreaming of one who will never bless me more."

"Nay, an so much depend on thy adventure of to-morrow," replied Isoline, kindly, "go, and God speed thee! remember only, thy life is not thine own to fling away as nothing worth. E'en if the prisoner thou seekest be not here, she may still be elsewhere."

"Dost thou, canst thou feel interest in that life?" murmured the knight, bending his dark eyes upon her, with an

expression which at the moment she felt she dared not meet. "Oh, lady, an thou dost, e'en were this hope void and vain as many another, life were still not all a desert—it had still one dream of joy."

"Sir Amiot," replied the lady, so calmly and firmly, that every half-rising hope shrunk back at once, "I listen not to such words, meaningless and void as they must be, with this mystery still clinging round you. I would believe you honest as you seem, noble and single-minded as you are faithful to King Robert, and gallant in his cause; give me not occasion to change this opinion by a renewal of words, which are somewhat too seriously spoken for mere gallantry, and yet can mean nothing else. I honour your devotion to an injured and imprisoned one; I could have wished to believe that one alone the object of your devotion, but I have by chance heard words addressed to and witnessed emotion occasioned by another which, increasing the mystery around you, compels me to feel that even were my conclusions wrong concerning the object of your vow, there is yet another existing cause which prohibits my listening to such words. I would feign believe you intend no insult, nought that could awaken indignation and displeasure on my part; that they are mere words of courtesy, somewhat too highflown perchance for our relative positions, but an my favour be worth preserving, speak them not again."

She bowed slightly, perchance haughtily, and passed on; her beautiful form more proudly erect, her fair cheek slightly flushing, but giving no other bodily sign to contradict the calm and steady self-possession of her words. Sir Amiot stood bewildered, scarcely comprehending, and certainly not composed enough calmly to analyse sentences, whose sole effect appeared to be to dash down hopes, of whose very existence and whose powerful extent he was scarcely and certainly not at all conscious before.

The next sunset found Sir Amiot of the Branch in his tent; his adventure so gallantly yet so coolly performed, as to awaken the admiration not alone of his own friends but of the English on the walls, whose surprise at his daring paralysed their arms, and permitted him almost an unmolested course. It was a deed in the very spirit of the age; both citizens and garrison looked on in stupified

amaze, as, armed cap-a-pie, his lance in rest, and followed by the daring page, holding aloft his master's banner, with the same bearing as his shield—the blighted branch—he slowly and deliberately made the circuit of the castle walls, directly under the darts and arrows of the soldiers, several of which struck his armour and bounded from it as if the steel were in truth invulnerable, and the knight bore a charmed life. He neared the drawbridge, was seen to halt before the warder's tower, spoke some brief words to that officer, but in a tone too low for the spectators of either side to distinguish their sense, though they observed with alarm that a band of English soldiers were silently and cautiously advancing, as if to surprise and surround him. The knight looked round him with a calm proud smile, bowed courteously to the warder, and passed on, so utterly unintimidated by the foes gathering around him, as to awaken a shout of applause both from English and Scotch, and loud and fierce was the command of the English governor to the closing troop to bear back, and give the brave knight way.

Shouts and gratulations received him in his own camp; his companions crowded round him, eager to give him the meed of admiration, which in their young chivalric breasts had no shade of envy. Each troop shouted joyously as he passed, and even the king himself felt it almost impossible to preserve his grave disapproval of the erratic deed. It was some time before Sir Amiot could break from his companions and seek the rest and quiet of his own tent, which even in the midst of that excitement, he seemed to crave; and when he was there alone with his page, all animation fled, leaving in its stead a sinking despondency, which his brave companions would have found it difficult to solve. For some time the page removed his armour in silence, but then, finding his master made no effort to rally, he cheerfully exclaimed—

“Do not despond, my dear master; rather rejoice that my beloved lady is removed from that horrible confinement, that though still a prisoner, she may be in comparative peace and comfort.”

“But how may I know this, Malcolm? true, I should rejoice that at least she is no longer incarcerated where that tyrant Edward placed her, six years ago; but how may I rest secure as to her comfort? May it not be that because—

Berwick is now so near triumphant Scotland, her prisons are changed, but not their severity? She may be in equal suffering elsewhere."

"Hardly, my lord; there cannot be two such horrible places of confinement in England, particularly when we know this was erected by the tyrant's brutal policy expressly for her. No, trust me, if Edward has had pity enough to remove her from here, it is to place her in some more comfortable asylum, perchance even with Queen Margaret."

"But where, oh, where?" repeated his master, sadly. "Such thought does but lengthen the line of separation; for until the king can ransom those captives whose rank will only make Edward more tenacious of their persons, she, too, must languish a prisoner, and I can in nowise shorten that captivity. Better had she been still a captive in some northern castle, where my own right arm might give her freedom; and so she may be still, and yet concealed from me—and still, still, my hope is vain."

"Nay, an thou thinkest thus, my lord, and sayest, did a northern castle contain her, thine own right arm should gain her freedom, give me but leave of absence from the camp for a brief while, and trust me, an she be in the north of England, be it castle, prison, or convent, I will find her."

"Convent!" repeated his master, starting up, as if under the influence of some sudden thought. "Malcolm, Malcolm, have I been such an idiot, a blinded, witless fool, as to be in her presence and not know it—can it be? no, no, it is impossible!"

"In heaven's name! my lord, what mean you?" exclaimed the page, astounded at such unlooked-for and mysterious emotion. "In her presence, and not know it? oh, 'tis impossible. When—where—how could it be?"

A few hurried words sufficed for the ready-witted boy to understand to whom the knight alluded, although he combated the fancy as impossible; however veiled and shrouded she might be, he declared his master must have known her. In vain Sir Amiot urged he had seen not a feature, heard not a tone of her voice, and with his firm conviction that she was still in Berwick, it was more than possible he had failed to recognise her. Malcolm still seemed to think the fancy too vague for reality.

Sir Amiot's first impulse was to beseech the king's permission to retrace his steps, instead of accepting the honourable commission offered in his homeward march; yet, as his page wisely alleged, what good could that possibly effect. It was far better for him (Malcolm) to leave the camp, and, commencing with the convent of Mount Carmel, leave no stone unturned to discover her retreat. Left to his own measures, he assured Sir Amiot he could discover infinitely more than were he in company with others. He was certain, were she in any part of the north of England, however closely concealed or strictly guarded, he would find her out, and so watch the movements of her keepers as to learn every minutiae concerning her present fate and future destination. That done, it would be time for Sir Amiot to lay down his plans for her liberation, or at least the alleviation of her captivity; till then, his master had much better remain where the favour of the king had placed him, and not give rise to any remark by even hinting a desire to leave the camp. The boy spoke so well and earnestly, Sir Amiot felt he could advance little against his argument, and conscious he boasted not a little more than he really could perform, consented to give him the leave of absence he demanded, and conjured him in God's name to do all he said speedily as might be. A definite period for his absence Malcolm could not or would not name; he would rejoin Sir Amiot, without fail, as soon as he had obtained the necessary intelligence, or at least obtained some clue, however slight, to her destination: more he might not promise, and Sir Amiot felt satisfied, for he knew that, next to himself, the liberation of this important prisoner was dear to Malcolm. The following morning the page was to depart; but ere that night closed, even this engrossing subject fled for the time being from Sir Amiot's mind.

A large party of knights and noblemen supped that evening in King Robert's tent, and many a jest mingling with graver topics enlivened the festive hour. The king's seat, almost imbedded in the thick tapestried curtain that lined the canvas covering of the tent, was divided several paces from the larger board, round which the more numerous of his warrior guests were congregated. Lennox and about five others of the senior noblemen, with

two or three of his favourite knights, not amounting to more than ten altogether, shared the monarch's private table, five on either hand, and thus leaving an open space for him to look over his other guests, and sometimes join their converse. Sir Amiot, detained somewhat later than the rest by his exciting conversation with his page, had taken his seat at the bottom of the second table, which was exactly facing the king's seat, and commanding a clear view of the thick curtains behind it. On his way to the pavilion he had observed a dark shadow hovering, or rather crouching down outside, on a spot just answering to the sovereign's seat within, but believing it Robert's favourite hound, who often ensconced himself there, between the canvas and the lining, he passed on without further notice. He had not been long seated at table, however, before he fancied there was some movement in the tapestried folds, which could scarcely be occasioned by the wind, still he thought of the dog, and believed the movement proceeded from the animal's endeavouring to extricate himself from his retreat. A sudden bark, not two paces from him, however, proved the fallacy of the idea, for there was King Robert's hound close beside him, endeavouring, as it seemed, to arrest his attention. The shadow, then, which he saw, could scarcely have been the dog, and Sir Amiot, spite of himself, felt strangely startled; still he shrunk from noticing such slight signs aloud, for define what he saw or imagined was impossible. Presently the dog darted up the tent to the king's side, barking and restless, and furious when attempts were made to remove him from that one particular spot. For awhile the king endeavoured to soothe and pacify him, but that not succeeding, and annoyed at the animal's pertinacity, he desired one of the attendants to take him from the tent, a proceeding not effected without difficulty. His attention yet more awakened by this incident, Sir Amiot still kept his eye fixed on the drapery, but for so long a time after Bruin's retreat without discovering any movement, that he believed he had been merely under a delusion, and turned again to the board. Not long after, he was certain a gleam of steel flashed on his eye, proceeding, he could have sworn, from that same drapery, which again slightly moved; neither the king nor any of his immediate companions were in armour, and there

certainly was nothing near them to have caused that sudden flash. With a silent but irresistible impulse, Sir Amiot quietly glided from his seat, and passing along the folds of the inner drapery, stood on the left hand of the king, nearly concealed by the curtain, almost before his absence from the table was discovered. It was well he did so, another moment, surrounded though he was by his faithful subjects, dreaming nought of treachery, closely shrouded by hearts who would willingly have died for him, yet even then Robert the Bruce would have fallen beneath an assassin's hand, and the foul murderer escaped. Sir Amiot had moved with silence and caution, not alone to prevent observation on the part of his companions, but the better to watch the movement of the curtain, that if treachery did indeed lie ambushed there, it might not take fright at his vicinity, and escape ere its extent was ascertained. It was a daring plan, relying so much on his own single arm and personal address, but the knight knew his own power; he stood so completely between the king and the drapery, that no blow could reach Robert except through him—and the blow came. A dagger flashed in the air and fell, but, checked violently in its downward path by the bright sword of Sir Amiot, it snapped in two, the blade hurled violently across the king's table, giving the first sign, the first intelligence of the imminent danger the sovereign had escaped, followed instantly by the loud voice of the knight. "Ha! traitorous villain, thinkest thou to escape me?" a fierce though momentary struggle, and a powerful form, clad from head to foot in mail, for his shrouding cloak was torn aside, was flung violently to the ground, the knee of Sir Amiot was on his breast, the voice of the knight, bidding him avow his treachery and die. In an instant, all was wild uproar; nobles and knights sprung simultaneously to their feet, their swords gleaming in their hands, execrations on their lips; the whole camp wild with confusion. The king alone, though startled, preserved his undaunted composure.

"Peace, peace!" he exclaimed, waving his hand to command control; "we are safe, uninjured, thanks to my brave Amiot, though how he came so close to us at such a critical moment, by my kingly faith, I know not. Give way there! Unhelm the villain—we should know that form."

He was obeyed on the instant. Still prostrate, motionless;

as if the failure of his desperate deed had been attended with a complete suspension of sense, the mailed figure lay beneath the knee of his captor. The helmet rudely and hastily unclasped, rolled off, disclosing features of a ghastly paleness indeed, but whose swarthy hue, expression coarse, almost to brutality, and black bristly beard and hair could belong to one alone. With a wild, shrill cry, which at another moment would have turned the attention of every one upon him, Sir Amiot sprung to his feet as if a dagger had pierced his heart, his poniard dropped from his nerveless grasp, his brain turned giddy, and a strong effort alone prevented his falling to the ground; he staggered back, till he found temporary support against one of the posts of the tent, and there stood, his eyes glaring on the prisoner, so changed from the Amiot of a minute before, as if some spell had turned him into stone; but so great was the excitement of the moment, and startling to all the identity of the prisoner, that the strange emotion of the knight was unremarked. Raised from the ground, his arms strongly pinioned, and so surrounded that escape was utterly impossible, they placed the prisoner before the Bruce, on whose noble brow the dark terrible frown of wrath and hate was gathering; but dark as was his look, yet darker, fiercer was that of the foiled assassin; for not alone was it hate, undying quenchless hate, but despair, the fell despair of hate and murder foiled.

"'Tis even as I thought. Earl of Buchan, we have met again," said the Bruce, speaking in those slow suppressed tones, terrible to all who heard, for they knew the fierce struggle that was at work within. "Man of guilt and blood, was it not enough to bind thine hirelings to a deed of midnight murder—enough, that twice, thrice, nay, seven times, a gracious Providence stretched out His arm 'twixt me and them, and proved how weak is guilt? Could this not satisfy thee, but thine own mind must essay the murderer's steel, thine own mind frame an act of murder? Oh, thou hast done well! Nobles and knights will henceforth be tried in the light of John Comyn, Earl of Buchan; an they possess his knightly and noble qualities, the loudest voice of fame and chivalry must needs be satisfied."

"Deemest thou so bounded was the Comyn's hate, that aught of what men term fame and honour could weigh

against it?" replied the prisoner, gloomily. "Robert of Carrick, I thought you had known men better. Didst dream, because some score of hirelings failed to accomplish the deed of death, Comyn of Buchan would swerve from the hate which, stronger than any vow, bound him to thy destruction. Murder—nay, an thus thou speakest, I have learned the trade from thee."

"Away with the sacrilegious villain—away with the murderous traitor!" shouted many eager voices, and there was a rush as if to drag him from the tent, but at a sign from the king, they paused.

"Nay, let his idle words have vent, my friends," he said. "The Bruce would have given his head to Edward's axe ere he would have secured his safety by the treacherous murder of his foe. To you I need scarce say this; then what evil can that bold bad man's insinuations do? No, an it give him pleasure, let him rail on."

"Pleasure!" repeated the imprisoned earl, with a scowl and tone of concentrated hate. "Ye have foiled me in the dream of years, the vision which has been the only bright gleam of my existence—thy death—thou hated foe of the house of Comyn; for this I bade them report me dead. I hid myself from man to brood on this, to arm my followers against thee, and bid them die accursed if they failed; for this I have hovered round thy path, well-nigh lashed to madness, when weeks, months rolled on, and found me still seeking that which the veriest chances seemed determined to deny me. To-night, to-night I would have done it, aye, in the midst of thy proud court, thy mock parade of royalty; who would have saved thee? Murderer, thou wouldst have fallen; ten thousand curses light on him who stood between me and my revenge!"

A low convulsive groan, as wrung from the very depth of agony, filled up the pause which followed these words. Men knew not, traced not whence it came, for their spirits were still under too great an excitement for such a slight sound to be remarked.

"Murderer—the name is threefold thine," replied the Bruce, calmly. "Villain, where is thy son, the brave and noble boy whose only crime was loving Scotland and his sovereign better than his race? What hast thou done with

him? lieth not his murder at thy door, and darest thou speak of blood ill shed?"

"Aye; for on him I did no murder," replied the earl, bluntly and freely; "the boy was wise, and chose honour and life and a monarch's favour rather than perpetual chains. Look to thyself, thou upstart shadow of a sovereign; his father's vow is in keeping—he hath learnt the hate and claims of Comyn."

"False, false—'tis false as hell!" was slowly and distinctly uttered by some one within the tent, but none knew or traced by whom.

"Aye, by my kingly faith, I still believe it false, and would say thou liest, base traitor!" resumed the king, sternly. "But wherefore bandy words with such as thee? Thy hate to ourself we pardon, but not thy treachery to Scotland. Away with him! to-morrow's dawn he dies."

There was no need for a second bidding; with a fierce yell of triumph and detestation, they dragged him from the presence of their sovereign. They stripped him of his armour, loaded him with chains, and, with a strong guard both within and around the tent which served them for a prison, left him to his meditations.

"And where is our brave preserver, our gallant and faithful Amiot? We have been detained only too long from acknowledging our grateful feeling of his loyal service. We would fain know how he was at our side when most needed; a minute before, methought we pledged him at the board—where is the gallant knight?" So spoke King Robert, when some degree of order was restored within the tent, but Sir Amiot had disappeared.

To allay the clamour and excitement which the news of this providential escape from assassination created in the camp, King Robert mounted his horse, and, all unarmed as he was, slowly rode through the several ranks which had gathered under their respective leaders to receive him. Nothing could have given them a stronger proof of his own utter fearlessness of any further lurking treachery, or a more gratifying sign of his perfect confidence in their love and devotion as his dearest safeguard from such treasonous attacks; they thronged round him as he appeared, making the night eloquent with their rude yet heartfelt cheers of love and gratulation.

Deeply moved by these heart-stirring manifestations of a people's love, it was only when seated in the quiet and solitude of his private pavilion near midnight, he found leisure to remember that he had not remarked Sir Amiot amongst the groups of officers he had passed, and he was rising to make some inquiry concerning him from an esquire in the ante-chamber, when the missing knight himself stood before him.

"At length, my noble Amiot!" exclaimed the monarch, springing up and grasping his hand, despite the young man's resistance; "where and wherefore hast thou been hidden these long hours, letting my gratitude lie on my heart till it has well-nigh choked me? Shame on thee! knowest thou Scotland owes to thee a king and Bruce a life?"

"Nay, good my liege, my lowly service demands not any spoken gratitude; my thanks are to heaven, that I was His selected instrument in thus preserving thy most precious life; but for aught else, my noble sovereign, speak not of thanks: that thou art saved, uninjured, is enough, oh, more than enough, 'tis blessedness for Amiot. What had I been in this camp without thee?"

"What? why a noble soldier still," replied the sovereign, joyously. "Did I make thee the gallant warrior, the prudent counsellor, the able general thou art? No, Amiot, no; thine own good qualities have won thee love and estimation in the camp, aye, and still more, in Robert's breast; and now, because that it is not enough, an Scotland loves me as she would manifest, and we would fain believe, why, she owes thee a debt of gratitude she never can repay; for, by my faith, hadst thou not been beside me, that one moment had been my last. And what, in heaven's name, brought thee there so coolly and calmly, shielding us from the villain, that the danger was unknown till it was passed?"

Sir Amiot related the signs he had witnessed, and the suspicions they had occasioned, acknowledging that he was so little conscious of the actual danger which threatened, that he scarcely knew how he had warded off the blow, or how obtained possession of the murderer.

"And my poor hound would have warned me, had I listened to him," mused the king, patting the faithful animal's noble head, as he lay crouched by his side; "Bruin, Bruin, canst thou forgive me?"

The dog licked his hand, as in mute reply, and the king continued—

“Ah, that’s well ; and now Amiot, what ails *thee* ? Thou hast something on thy heart, something that grieves or at best torments thee ; thou hast told a tale that at another time would have lighted up that dark eye of thine with living fire, and made thy voice ring out with animation, and now thine eye is dull, and thy voice is grave. What ails thee, boy ? Speak not to the king, but as to thy friend, thy father, if thou list.”

“In truth, there is a weight upon my heart, most gracious sovereign, and one thou only canst remove,” replied the knight, in a low, suffocated tone, and sinking on his knee.

“Name it then, mine Amiot, in heaven’s name ! it were a relief to feel I could do aught for thee, for truly my debt to thee is heavy, even forgetting the service of this evening. What wouldst thou ? surely it needs not thy knee—up, and speak to me as friend to friend.”

“Oh, pardon me, my sovereign, I cannot rise ; my knee is a fit posture for a boon like mine, and one, whose very origin I may not speak. In truth, I came a suppliant, and of a boon so weighty, my tongue shrinks from its speech.”

“Nay, that may be, and yet the boon be not so very weighty, my modest Amiot,” replied the king, encouragingly. “Thou thinkest so much of the very smallest kindness, that truly I believe thy mental vision magnifies every action save thine own.”

“No, no—judge me not now by the past,” said the knight, in a tone of intense suffering. “My liege, my liege, I come to ask that which all Scotland will rise up to deny, which every private and public feeling as a man, as a king, will call on thee to refuse.”

“By my kingly crown, Amiot, thou triest our royal curiosity sorely,” answered the king, still endeavouring to jest, though the voice of Sir Amiot jarred painfully on his kind heart. “What is this weighty boon ? out with it—trust me, it shall be granted an it can ; for what Scotland can have to do with a subject ’twixt thee and me I cannot imagine.”

“It hath in this, my liege ; the life of an attainted taitor, a treacherous regicide, is forfeited alike to his country and his king. Oh, must I still speak—thou canst not even guess my boon, ’tis too wild, too improbable ? my liege, my liege,

"is even so. I would beseech the life of him who hath sought thy life, who hath hunted, persecuted, armed a hundred hands against thee—even him, the husband of Isabella—Comyn of Buchan—in mercy, do not let him die."

"This is strange indeed, most strange," replied the sovereign, his first start and attitude of extreme astonishment subsiding into gravity, nearly approaching sternness; "a weighty boon in truth, and one how may we grant. Wherefore dost thou ask it—what is he to thee?"

"Ask not, sovereign of Scotland; ask not, if thou hast indeed one kindly feeling left for Amiot; ask not, for, oh, I cannot answer," reiterated the unhappy young man, in an accent of such utter abandonment, the king felt strangely moved. "Had any other hand but mine secured him, exposed him to this doom, perchance I had not dared implore thee thus; but as it is, his blood, his death will be upon my soul, crushing it to earth with a dull, dead weight, against which it can never, never rise. Monarch of Scotland, in mercy look not on me thus; there may come a day when this dark mystery may be solved, when I may tell thee wherefore I thus beseech, conjure thee; but until then my sovereign, oh, my king, have pity on my deep wretchedness, grant me this man's life."

"That he may arm a hireling band once more against our life, pursue with midnight sword or poisoned bowl, till his end be gained. Amiot, for ourself we fear him not; but for Scotland, against whom he hath so foully, grievously offended, would this be wise?"

"Condemn him to perpetual exile; bind him by the most solemn oath that man can take, to forswear the shores of Britain for ever and for ever; keep him in ward, under charge of the truest officer your grace may select, until some far distant shore be gained: do this, my sovereign—I ask but his life, only his life. Oh, if thou wouldst not burden my life with a weight I can never cast aside, my liège, my liege, let not his blood be shed."

"What is Amiot asking so pitifully, gentle Robert?" said a sweet thrilling voice, so suddenly, that both the king and the knight started almost in terror, both too excited at the moment to recognise the tones of Agnes, whose light form, enveloped in flowing drapery, stood like some spirit noiselessly between them; "what would he have that

Robert finds such difficulty in granting? Grant it, gentle Robert, for he is so kind to Agnes, and she can give him nothing, nothing in return."

"Tell me first, sweet one, why thou art here—wherefore not at rest?" answered the king, laying aside all gravity, all sternness, to fold his arm round her, and press a kiss upon her cheek. "Must I chide thee, loveliest, seeking me at such an hour alone?"

"Oh, no, thou wilt not, Robert. They told me that thy life, thy precious life had been endangered," she clung to him as if terrified even at the thought, "and there was such bustle and noise amidst the soldiers, I came to see if indeed thou wert as safe and free from ill as they declared thee."

"Didst doubt it, then, my love?"

"Oh, now I know not what I feared; not that thou wert injured. No, no, Robert the Bruce will live; his life is all too dear, too sacred for a murderer's hand. Said not the voice of Nigel he shall live, be free, be glorious, and doth he not shrine thee round whenever danger comes, and save thee, shield thee, that thou mayest be blessed? Oh, none shall hurt thee, gentle Robert; no hand shall thrive against thee. Thou knowest not how often I list the voice of my noble love breathing these solemn words; sometimes they sound even ere I see him in his beauteous dwelling—they tell me he is near. But what ailest thee, kind Amiot? thou art so sad."

"I plead a life," huskily murmured the knight, who, instead of benefiting by the unexpected apparition of Agnes to gain some portion of composure, appeared, if possible, yet more agitated. "Lady, sweet lady, plead thou with me."

"Ask it not, ask it not," hurriedly answered the king, more moved than he had yet been. "Amiot, Amiot, the sight of this poor innocent child hath brought darker and fiercer thoughts; bid her not plead for one she knows not as her father—one who hath heaped such wrongs on her mother's head and on hers, and on her ill-fated brother, be he alive or dead, that with loud tones call on us for justice and revenge. Traitor against his country and his king, vile slanderer of his wife, destroyer of her peace, and of her children, and more, yet more than all, sought he not the prison of my brother, my noble brother, my own loved Nigel—aye, and taunted, vilified, tortured him, raised his

murdering sword against him even then, when the next morning beheld his execution? execution, said I, his foul murder. Did he not set Edward on against him, urging him yet more fiercely to seek his blood, when the tyrant might have pardoned Thomas, Alexander, and Seaton, my sister's husband. Cries not their blood aloud, and shall I not have vengeance?"

"Vengeance! who spoke of vengeance?" answered Agnes, starting from the sovereign's side, and standing suddenly erect, voice, feature, movement, all denoting a fearful state of excitement. "Vengeance! vengeance! said he not? Thou shouldst not dream of vengeance, sully the pure flame of patriotism and of freedom. No, no! Robert of Scotland, thou shalt not seek vengeance; thou shalt not blacken that fair name my Nigel shields. He speaks to thee; he bids thee pause in this work of blood—see, see! he hovers o'er thee—his beautiful smile is gone; he trembles lest in this dread trial thy wonted strength should fail. Oh, do not anger him; Robert, Robert, for his sake, seek not vengeance. Hark! canst thou not hear? he speaks, he charges thee—give up thy vengeance. He will vanish in wrath, fold up that lovely form in sorrow. Speak; Robert, Robert, king, father, let him not go! Nigel, my beloved, my own, come from that shrouding cloud; speak, speak thyself. Oh, he hath gone, gone!—and still, still he bids thee seek not vengeance."

Her voice had grown wilder, shriller, till its sweet bird-like notes were utterly lost, and she had flung herself at the feet of the king, convulsively clasping his knees while her beautiful eyes alternately gazed on the king, and then wandering wildly round the tent, told only too painfully the fearful paroxysm, which seeming to bring madness to the verge of collected sense, was again in all its horrors upon her. In vain the Bruce strove to raise, to soothe her; she resisted, reiterating her wild entreaty, until Robert, in a low, deep, impressive voice, won her ear to listen to these words: "Agnes, it shalt be as thou wilt. Alas! poor sufferer, thou knowest not for whom thou pleadest, yet if thou didst, thou couldst scarce plead more eloquently. Be calm, be content, sweet; for thy Nigel's sake, I swear I will not seek vengeance. I will ask mine own heart, and if indeed it whisper 'tis vengeance and not justice make it thus

inveterate, I swear he shall not die. Will that content thee, Agnes? Robert wills not vengeance."

"Content me? yes, yes!" she sprung up, clasping her hands in joy, but the voice was scarcely articulate from faintness; her limbs so trembled Sir Amiot caught her in his arms. "And not me alone—see, he hath come again. My love, my own noble love—he stretches out his arms over thee, to bless, to shield thee; he smiles on us both, he calls us. Nigel, Nigel, oh, why may I not come?" she struggled to bound forward, but strength failed, her head drooped, her extended arms sunk powerless, and she lay like death in Sir Amiot's arms.

"Bear her gently hence, good friend, I feared this. Oh, when will these terrible attacks depart; poor child, poor child, what have not these horrible wars cost thee! Gently, dear Amiot. Isoline's tent joins mine, that way; give her to my niece's charge, 'tis all thou canst do, and then do thou return." The king spoke in excessive agitation, and Sir Amiot, scarcely less agitated himself, only bowed in reply, and tenderly bearing the inanimate form of Agnes in his arms, vanished by the side entrance to which the king had pointed. Robert continued to pace the tent, till emotion was in some degree calmed. "Yes, yes," at length he unconsciously thought aloud, "had this foul traitor, this ruthless assassin been other than Comyn of Buchan, I had not been thus inveterate, thus determined against my faithful Amiot's pleadings; then am I not actuated by vengeance, besides whose grim form justice is but a dim, formless shadow? My brother, my brother, hadst thou been in Robert's place, thou hadst not hesitated thus, and now, aye, even now, thou shalt be my guardian angel still. Thy last words bade me leave vengeance to other, higher hands; and oh, if thou canst look down on earth, thou knowest how often that charge hath checked my avenging hand, and given life, when every passion shouted slay; and now, now, shall they have less power now? No, no! Nigel, Nigel, for thy dear sake, thou wouldst give life, and so will Robert. Ha! returned, mine Amiot? Had the Lady Isoline retired? with whom didst leave thy poor afflicted charge?"

"In the care of the Lady Isoline, my liege, she had not yet gone to rest."

"Ha! and didst speak with her?"

"Briefly, my lord; she but detained me to ask if this evening's tale were true."

"Which thou must have answered, methinks, as briefly, to have returned so soon; well, she shall hear more to-morrow. For thy boon, it is granted; perpetual exile, on penalty of instant death, if found again on Scottish shores, shall be the traitor's doom. Nay, kneel not, look not such ardent thanks. I fear me, Amiot, had it not been for the Lady Agnes, the memories she brought, we had scarce attained sufficient self-command to have done this, even for thy sake, to whom we owe a life; therefore, look not thanks, they do but speak reproach, which perchance we merit, but which as yet we cannot bear. And now, good night, my faithful soldier; we are not yet ourself, and would be alone."

Sir Amiot threw himself at the feet of the monarch, raised his hand passionately to his lips, and, without uttering another word, departed.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

SEVEN days after this stirring event beheld the large army of Robert the Bruce divided according to his plans before mentioned. He himself had marched down to the shores of Dumfries, whence Douglas had already despatched messengers, informing him that the Solway Frith was filled with a gallant fleet, eagerly awaiting his arrival, and all impatience to take advantage of the first fair wind to sail for the Isle of Man. Robert had only waited for this, and the unexpected intelligence of Douglas being there before him expedited his movements. Randolph with his fair charge and the greater part of the remaining army had also commenced their return northward, intending to make Edinburgh their resting, until they should receive other orders from Lord Edward Bruce. To Sir Amiot, with a third of the army, had been intrusted the safe keeping of the Earl of Buchan, whom they were to conduct to Dunbar, and imprison in that castle till a vessel for his transportation to the north of Europe could be prepared and manned. This

done, Sir Amiot had demanded and received permission to join Lord Edward Bruce, without delay, and those of his men who needed not rest were at liberty to accompany him. Few indeed there were who chose to turn back from such an expedition, for already had Dundee and Rutherglen bowed before his arms, and now Stirling—impregnable, all-desired Stirling—was the object of his attack, and resolute determination to obtain.

It was not long before a strongly-built, gallantly-manned vessel lay moored before Dunbar, waiting the prisoner she was to bear from his native land. Gloomily the earl had acceded to the conditions offered by the Bruce, accepting his life at the price of perpetual exile; his was no martyr's spirit, whose glory hath sometimes shed a lustre even over crime. His hatred of the Bruce was the only marked feeling of his existence; he would not have cared to die, could he have given death unto his foe, but that object foiled again, and at the very moment of its fulfilment, his dark suspicious spirit robed itself in the belief that even hell itself was against him, and all other efforts were in vain. He was no coward to fear to die, but he did fear the horrible ignominy of a public execution—the triumph such a fate would give, not alone his foes but the country he had so basely abandoned, against whom he had inveterately fought, and therefore was it, when informed his sentence was perpetual exile, and his solemn oath demanded never to return to Scotland, he made the vow, unmoved in outward seeming, but inwardly relieved. The indignation of the camp at this wholly unexpected clemency of the king was extreme, breaking out into almost open rebellion, requiring Robert's royal authority to quell and soothe into content. Sir Amiot's share in this decision was never known; an undefinable feeling on the part of the sovereign prevented his ever speaking of it, and whatever the king might think—and he had thought on the subject—never quitted his own breast.

The evening was dark and lowering, that leaden appearance of sea and sky and heaviness of atmosphere which seldom fail to sink the heart with a species of despondency impossible to be defined, and as impossible to be withstood. The vessel lay like a gigantic shadow on the still water; her sails, some furled around the masts, and others flapping

idly in the heavy air. A party of armed soldiers stood grouped upon a cliff, midway between the castle and the sea, evidently under orders, though at this moment taking various attitudes of ease; below them, and concealed from their observation, two forms were standing on the beach, looking out on the ocean, as if anticipating a boat to be lowered from the vessel, for the accommodation of the prisoner, to whom the signal of embarkation had been already given. They were the Knight of the Branch and the Earl of Buchan, both evidently under the dominion of some strong subject of interest.

"And who art thou that darrest press upon me thus?" fiercely interrogated the earl, turning full upon his companion, whose features were still concealed by the half mask and long, drooping feather of a military cap. "Is it not enough that thine arm foiled me in my purpose, saved my hated foe, and made me what I am? that thou art the one selected to keep watch upon me, poisoning my few moments of tranquillity with thy hated presence, for ever reminding me that I essayed a deed of murder, and it failed? Away! and leave to others the charge of my person, I will not answer thee."

"Earl of Buchan," replied the knight, in a tone which spoke only respect and deep sadness, "I took not this charge upon me to taunt thee with memories better forgotten; I accepted it, as my heart dictated, to spare thee the scorn, contumely, harshness, which from other than myself had been thy portion on thy journey, in thy prison, aye, till Scottish shores had faded from thy view; nay, thy very life had been endangered, and 'twas for this I took this charge upon me—for this his highness offered it."

"Oh, the life of a Comyn must be of marvellous worth to a petted follower of the Bruce," answered the earl, his harsh voice unsoftened by the calm sadness of the reply. "Methinks thou hast a marvellously eloquent gift of oratory; yet that my life, my comfort were in thy thoughts when this honourable office was tendered thee by that spoiled minion of fortune they call a king, I pray your mercy for its disbelief."

"Perchance, my lord, the fact that thy life was granted at my entreaty may in part dispense a disbelief but too natural; for the rest—"

"Ha! my life granted at thy request; and what, in the fiend's name, is my life to thee?" interrupted the earl, somewhat less fiercely; "yet, if it be so, I thank thee. Exile is preferable to death on a scaffold, aye, and better still, than compelled to call that hated Carrick king."

"Perchance, then, my lord, thou wilt bear with my presence the remaining interval we must pass together; pardon that which may have hitherto seemed intrusion, and believe that which I have asserted relating to thy comfort is truth, strange as it may seem. If I have failed in aught that could have softened the harshness of imprisonment, I would pray you pardon it, that we may part in peace."

The earl looked at him with an astonishment which had the effect of almost softening the swarthy ruggedness of his features.

"Thou art marvellously well-spoken, young man; by mine honour, I should doubt those soft-sounding speeches, were we not to part so soon that I can guess nothing of thy drift. In heaven's name, who and what art thou? why didst thou press upon me thus but now a subject that ever drives me mad?"

"Nay, 'tis on that I must still speak, on that I must still brave thy wrath," answered the knight, boldly, yet still respectfully. "Earl of Buchan, I know that the tale thou tellest of thy son is false, I know that of him thou art no murderer; and I would know, aye, on my knee I would beseech thee, tell me, wherefore hast thou forged this groundless falsehood—wherefore, oh, wherefore thus poison the minds of his countrymen, that if, in his own proper person, he should appear again amongst them, nought but mistrust, dislike, misprison will await him? My lord, my lord, wherefore was the need of cruelty like this?"

"Wherefore—art thou so dull-witted as not to know? Wherefore create scorn, misprison, mistrust amid his countrymen?—that he should never join them. Thinkest thou I, a Comyn, can look with composure on my own son joining hand and glove with my foes? No, by every fiend in hell!—but why speak thus? I have no son," and that proud, dark, evil-passioned man turned hurriedly from Sir Amiot, every feature almost convulsed.

"Then, then thou dost acknowledge the tale is false; Alan Comyn is not thus perjured!" exclaimed Sir Amiot,

springing after him, and grasping the earl's mantle as if to detain him. "Oh, in mercy retract the foul assertion; leave with me some sign, some sealed and written sign, that will prove its falsity—tell to Scotland it is not Isabella's son that thus hath fallen; my lord, my lord, do this, and she, the wife that thou hast wronged, hast injured, even she will bless thee, and I—"

"Peace, fool; thinkest thou that I am mad, so fallen, that wilfully I will fall yet lower? retract a tale of years, and what retract? I have no son, save him that bears my name, my honour; that will be foes with my foes, friends with my friends, and such is he who bears the name of Alan Comyn, who is the friend of Edward. Retract—say that is not which is, and that which is is not; that she, whose rebellious spirit first created these evils, made me yet more the thing I am, may bless me. Pshaw! think of some better incentive, or thou pleadest in vain."

"Alas! there is none; if thine own heart refuseth justice to thine own child, what can a stranger plead?" replied Sir Amiot, mournfully.

"Justice to mine own; was the boy taught to do his father justice? was he not taught to hate, scorn, condemn me, to abhor, even to raise his prayers to heaven against my course of acting?"

"No, believe me, no!" replied the young knight, raising his clasped hands, and speaking in a tone of truthful fervour, impossible to be mistaken. "Oh, believe thy son was taught to love, to reverence thee as his father, even while he imbibed principles of patriotism contrary to thine own. Condemn thee! oh, how little knowest thou Isabella of Buchan; never, never did one word derogatory to the respect due to thee, as the husband of her youth, the father of her children, mingle in the instructions lavished upon them. Earl of Buchan, thy son would have revered thee, aye, loved thee, hadst thou not with a rude hand so torn affection's links asunder they never might be joined."

"And who art thou that darest tell me this?" answered the earl, darkly and terribly agitated. "I tell thee I have no son; the boy is dead—dead through my fiendish cruelty, though not by mine order. I would have given my right hand, aye, more, I would have foresworn my hatred to the Bruce, drawn back from my vow to compass his death, had

this not chanced, had the boy lived ; but he is dead—dead. His blood is upon my head, though not upon my hand ; and what matters, then, my future fate ? I have no son, save him whom men term Alan Comyn, minion of England's Edward ; and what, then, should I retract ? No, no, the boy is dead—dead through me ; and I shall proclaim this by the avowal that I am his murderer ? Never, by the blue vault above us, never !”

“Wouldst thou the boy lived now, Earl of Buchan ? didst thou know the boy lived, wouldst thou retract this tale, and more, retract the foul slander on Isabella's name, which severed those links that bound the son unto his father, and crushed his young spirit far more than those chains and dungeons in which 'tis said he died—wouldst thou do this, my lord ? 'Tis no idle parley ; give back thy son to life, retract the slander on his mother's name ; for if he died through thee, 'twas that which slew him ; do this, and Alan lives !”

“Ha ! canst recall the dead to life—tell me the boy lives—that of this black deed Buchan is guiltless—tell me he lives ? If thou canst, I will believe what thou wilt : that Duncan of Fife told me false ; that his sister, my wife, is pure and true as I did believe her, despite my hate, until he spoke those words that added fuel to my wrath, and heaped ten thousand injuries on her ill-fated head. I love her not, I cannot love her ; but an thou canst prove my boy lives, I will believe her guiltless, proclaim that I have foully wronged her ; prove that of my son I am no murderer. Ha ! God in heaven, what is this—who art thou ? speak ! Do my very eyes turn traitors, and tell me that which is not ?”

“They tell thee truth ; believe them, oh, believe them,” answered Sir Amiot, who was kneeling before the earl, his features exposed to the light of day, and his long, glossy hair falling back on either side from a face so faultless in its proportions, so beautiful in its expression, that it imprinted itself on the heart of that dark, harsh man as something scarce of earth, something sent from heaven. His eyes fixed themselves upon the kneeling form, so full of grace, of simple dignity, on the face upturned to his, in such glowing, truthful beauty—fixed till the eyelids quivered either beneath the intensity of the gaze, or from some emotion never felt before ; and as he laid both hands on the

shoulders of the young man he was aware that his whole frame so trembled he must have fallen without such support. And was this Comyn of Buchan, the cold, harsh, merciless, bloodthirsty Comyn—the cruel, injurious husband, the neglectful father, the traitor to his country, the would-be assassin of his king? Was this the man, bowed to the very dust, his whole being changed, every dark thought for the moment crushed beneath the mighty power of one emotion—that which is the breath of the Eternal, the symbol of “that likeness in which made He man,” found alike in the blessed and the accursed, the angelic and the reprobate, breathing of that divine origin which the veriest sinner cannot utterly cast aside; it will be heard, it will find vent, coming like a ministering angel to the darkest, hardest heart, and whispering of better things, aye, even of hope ‘mid sin; for if that love hath voice, hath being in the guilty sons of earth, what must be its power, its might, its durance in Him who hath breathed it in his children, and called himself their Father?

“Kneel not, kneel not. God in heaven! why am I thus—what is it that hath come upon me? I who have dreamed but of hate and blood and murder. I cannot love, yet what is this? Boy, boy, do not kneel; ’tis no fitting posture for such as thee, and to one hardened, blackened as Buchan. Up, up, I cannot bear it.”

“Father, I will kneel till thou hast blessed me; till thou hast recalled that horrible curse thundered against him who stood between thee and thy vengeance; till thou hast pardoned that which seemed rebellion ‘gainst thy power, but which, oh, I could not avert, for Scotland and my mother had yet stronger claims than thee. Father, I will not rise till thou hast blessed, till thou hast pardoned.”

“Blessed—boy, boy, oh, do not mock me—blessed, and by him that would have murdered thee, who hath poisoned thy fair name, and laid such heavy misery upon thy youth; pardoned, and ’tis I have wronged thee unto death.”

“Yet art thou still my father—still I am thy son; oh, ’tis no mockery, father, thou knowest not thy children; oh! that it might have been, thou wouldst have found no failing in their love, and ’twas a *mother* taught it—aye, to respect, to cherish, e’en though duty threw us on such diverse paths. My father, thy curse hangs like a cloud upon my drooping spirit, thy blessing will give me strength for farther trial.”

"Boy, boy, I cannot bless; I know no prayer, no word meet for that dreadful Judge I never thought of until now. I will learn prayers to bless thee, and then—oh God, my son, my son!" Could it be that voice was choked—that bad man's arms were round that youthful form, in strong convulsive pressure—that thick and scorching tears fell, one by one, from eyes that knew not tears before? 'Twas even so, slowly, almost convulsively, the earl roused himself to gaze again upon his son. "And thy mother taught thee thus, gave thee such principles, instilled such feelings, when I gave only cause for hate, alike from her and thee? Tell her I crave her pardon, proclaim to the whole world I have foully wronged her. Oh, that I could force the black lie back into the slanderer's throat at the sword's point."

"Leave that unto her son. Hark!" he hastily resumed his mask, "not yet may I proclaim my name, my vow is yet to be accomplished; they come to part us. Oh, my father, think upon thy son; we shall yet meet again."

The earl shook his head mournfully.

"My son, that will never be; but trust to me, by the heaven above us, I swear I yet will do thee justice! there seems a black veil withdrawn from my heart and eyes. I do not yet know myself; but it will not pass—no, no, that face will come between me and returning darkness. I know not how thou wert saved, but 'tis enough, I am no murderer of my child."

What more might have passed between them was unknown; they had unconsciously passed this harrowing interview in a fissure, or open cavern, whose projecting cliffs concealed them from all observation from the sea, and prevented their perceiving the expected boat had been lowered, and now lay some fifty yards from them, waiting for the prisoner; the wind was rising, and promised too fair for further delay. Little did the soldiers who were to conduct the earl to the ship imagine the emotions at work in the hearts alike of their officer and his charge. Calmly, to all appearance, they walked side by side to the beach; they stood one minute in silence, gazing on each other, and the stout frame of Buchan was seen to quiver, as bent by some mighty struggle, his swarthy cheek turned ghastly pale, he made one step forward, half extended his hand, drew it back, as conscious that every eye was upon them, and thus they parted—the earl to hurry into

the boat, crouch down on one of the seats and bury his brow in his mantle, till not a feature could be discerned; Sir Amiot to linger on the beach till the boat reached the vessel, and slowly her sails were seen to expand, and heavily, as if reluctantly, she faded from his view. The varied emotions swelling in his bosom, the tumultuous thoughts occasioned by that interview, the words longing for vent, but doomed to rest unsaid, must be left to the imaginations of our readers, we are no more at liberty to lift the veil from them, than remove the mystery which Sir Amiot's vow still kept closely round him. He was still the nameless solitary unto others, and to us he must still remain so, till his own hand removes the mask, his own lips proclaim his name.

It was not till this excitement had in part subsided, not till the military confusion and joyous spirits around Stirling, presenting other engrossing subjects of reflections, had somewhat turned the current of his thoughts, and engaged him enthusiastically in all Lord Edward's daring projects, that he had at length leisure first to marvel, and then to grow uneasy at Malcolm's protracted absence. Despite the new subject of interest to his lord, occasioned by Buchan's attempted crime and consequent detention, the page had set off on his expedition the ensuing morning, as had been resolved between him and his master. One month extended over two, and not even the interest of the siege could prevent Sir Amiot's rapidly increasing anxiety. At length, nearly ten weeks after they had first parted, without either announcement or any outward semblance of long absence, Malcolm stood before him, with just the same quiet mien of respect and arch expression of feature as if no interruption whatever had taken place in his daily service to his master. Not so unconcerned Sir Amiot; springing to his feet, the plan of the castle, which he had been intently consulting, dashed down in the violence of the movement, he caught hold of the boy's hand, wildly exclaiming, "Returned at length, and successful! oh, tell me where hast thou been—what done? hast discovered any trace? Quick, Malcolm, quick!"

"Will one word satisfy thee, my lord? found, found!"

"God, I thank thee!" was the passionate rejoinder, and Sir Amiot threw himself back on his seat agitated almost

beyond control. "But where, oh, where? Is she but found to mock me with the vain dream of liberty, of life, alike to her and me? found, but to be lost again, till this poor country may pay her ransom?"

"She is where thou shalt rescue her, my lord."

"Ha! where, in St. Andrew's name?" Sir Amiot sprung up in ecstasy.

"Even in this goodly fortress, this coveted, impregnable Stirling."

"Here, here! oh, say it again. How can it be? when—whence—art sure?"

"My lord, give me but breathing-time, and thou shalt learn all this strange tale, fast as my lips can speak it."

Sir Amiot with an effort brought down his excited nerves to some degree of composure, and listened with intense interest to Malcolm's brief yet important tale. Although believing it utterly impossible his master could have seen the prisoner, in whose weal his whole being seemed involved, without recognising her, the page yet directed his first course towards the Convent of Mount Carmel. Much caution and readiness did it require for the perfect completion of his delicate mission, for the late attack on the hamlet had rendered the sisters yet more guarded in their communications. Our space will not permit us to follow the ready-witted boy in all the intricate windings of his divers plans, suffice it that he had been perfectly successful. At the outset he had ascertained that a Scottish prisoner of distinction was under wardance of the Abbess of our Lady of Mount Carmel, and, at the imminent risk of his limbs, and imprisonment if discovered, he contrived to conceal himself in the garden of the nunnery, and see her, too distinctly for even the shadow of a doubt as to her identity to remain. Assured of this, he hovered about the neighbourhood, having heard some rumours as to her removal; rumours, after a delay of some weeks, confirmed. The rest to one like himself was easy; he followed her guards, whose course, to his utter astonishment, was northward. Sometimes assuming disguise, he mingled with them, and learned that the distracted state of England, preventing all security for such an important prisoner, and almost incapacitating Edward from thinking of anything but his own personal cares and griefs, had caused him hurriedly to accede to the

request of the Abbess of Mount Carmel, in behalf of her prisoner, that if the late assault had determined his highness to change her present abode, she might be permitted a residence in one of the English garrisoned castles of Scotland; and the Earl of Derby, then marching to throw increased forces into Stirling, unconscious at the commencement of his march of that fortress's beleaguered state, was commissioned to transport her thither, with all due respect. This was important intelligence for the faithful Malcolm, and inspired him with yet increase of patience to follow the earl on his tedious march, and never lose sight of his movements, often detained as they were by the devious and hidden paths they were compelled to pursue. The wild glens and passes of the Cheviot Hills brought them undiscovered across the country to the desolate part of the coast of Ayrshire. There, in detached parties, they took possession of some fishing boats, and sailed up unsuspectingly to the very head of the lakes running up between Argyleshire and Dumbartonshire; there cautiously effecting a landing, the earl united his forces in the mountains and woods, and thus proceeded to the north of Stirling, so completely unsuspected, as to make his way that very day within the fortress, by a concealed postern leading to the underworks, their entrance covered by the desperate sallies of the besieged.

Sir Amiot listened to this narrative with the deepest attention, and then, with military precision, questioned his page again and again. Was he certain the prisoner was with them to the end? had he seen her enter the castle, or might she have been left in any convent on their way? Malcolm could not answer this decidedly. He had been compelled to part from them some days before to elude suspicion, nay, from the period of their landing in Dumbartonshire he had only watched their proceedings at a distance; but he was sure that she was with them still, and that Stirling Castle was now the fortress in which the prisoner on whom so much of Sir Amiot's happiness depended was immured.

Sir Amiot scarcely doubted this himself; but he had experienced too much of suspense, of that deep agony of hope roused but to be crushed, to rest secure even on this intelligence, much as there was in it to encourage and

inspire. He sate up half the night in earnest commune with his page, and at last his resolution was formed.

The next morning, somewhat to the astonishment of Lord Edward, his favourite officer, the Knight of the Branch, requested a week's furlough from the camp, coupled, however, with an assurance that within that time he should in all probability return, and bring with him information materially connected with the business of the siege. Sir Edward Bruce had too much confidence and love for Sir Amiot either to refuse or question; there was a spirit of daring about him so much akin to the living fire of his own breast, that it was enough for the knight to hint anything of a secret expedition, for Sir Edward to feel assured it must be something in which his whole spirit would sympathise and long to join.

Two days after Sir Amiot had departed, a minstrel made his appearance in the Scottish camp. He was clad in the green jerkin, leggings, and hose, with a short cloak of somewhat rich material for his fraternity, and secured at his throat by an emerald of value. Long curls of auburn hair shaded his face, which was almost concealed by a slouching cap and dark drooping feathers; his harp was slung across his neck; but there was something in his figure and martial step that would perhaps have seemed incompatible with his more peaceful employment, had not the exquisite taste and skill with which he touched his instrument confirmed the tale his dress proclaimed.

In the age of chivalry, the person of the minstrel was sacred as a herald, perchance yet more so, for where the latter might meet with contempt and rough treatment, the minstrel was ever received with honour and delight: his path was never stopped. He could pass free, and was welcomed with joy by opposing armies; both parties trying who could evince the most eagerness to listen to his lays, or show honour to his person. He could be sure of free passage through a besieging army, make his way unquestioned into the very stronghold of a beleaguered fortress; and therefore it was but in the very spirit of the time that the minstrel we have referred to refused the pressing invitation of the Scottish leaders to abide with them, and declared he was under an engagement to visit Stirling at a given time, which circumstances had already delayed; but being so

honoured by Lord Edward Bruce's great desire for his performance, he promised that, if the leaders would permit his departure without delay the succeeding morning, he would devote that evening to their service. The proposal was received with the greatest glee, and a joyous party met that evening to revel in the minstrel's lays. There was something in his joyous tone, in the buoyancy of youth and poetry which appeared to characterise him, that at once fascinated all hearts; while the spirit of his martial songs, the liquid richness of his deep-toned voice, held every ear enchained. A score of voices pledged him in the sparkling wine; a score of voices shouted loudly in his praise; and Lord Edward himself, albeit unused to love the minstrel's art, vowed he was one well-fitted for a warrior's guest, and detaching a golden brooch from his mantle, bade him wear it for his sake.

"For, by my father's soul, thou art the very king of minstrels!" he exclaimed; "and it is a crying sin and shame thou shouldst prefer the applause of those English knaves and that carpet knight Sir Philip de Mowbray to our own. Thy tongue favours the Scotch as fluently as the English. Whence comest thou? Edward of England would line thy pouch with gold pieces, I trow. An thou lovest the English, why not seek him?"

"Truly, my good lord, and lose my head for my pains. Know you not all Edward's minions are fated on the instant? Piers Gaveston's fate hath no charms for me."

"Thou art a ready-witted fellow, by my faith; hie thee to King Robert then, and thou shalt enjoy his favour, without any such drawback as envy to thy fame."

"Will your lordship grant me the opportunity of gaining that favour?—beware what you pledge, I may call on you to redeem it."

"Call on me and welcome; thy voice gains on my heart. I have heard but one like thee, and he—poor fellow, may his fate not be thine! I knew not his worth till he was gone," and Edward Bruce, the stern, harsh, iron-hearted warrior, passed his hand across his darkening brow as he thought of Nigel; the memory of his brother hushed his soul to silence.

The minstrel swept his hand across his harp, till a low, wailing strain woke from it, swelling louder and gladder, then

he expressed in song so exactly the transcript of the Bruce's feelings, that he started in astonishment. A silence of several minutes followed the lay, whose simple homage to the noble dead found its echo in every heart, and then burst forth a shout of applause, ringing through the canvas walls till the very soldiers marvelled wherefore. Edward Bruce sprung up and grasped the minstrel's hand. "Sing that to Robert," he cried, "and thy fortune's made!" Modestly, though smilingly, the minstrel received the delighted applause; and thus, with many a rude present thrust upon him, he left the general's tent.

The next morning saw him present himself before the gates of Stirling Castle, and he was instantly admitted. It was of no consequence that he had come from and perhaps tarried in the enemy's camp; he was a minstrel, and one too of no common seeming. Soldiers and officers hastened to greet him, and even the seneschal of the castle, Sir Philip de Mowbray, himself deigned to give him frank and joyous welcome.

"Truly, sir minstrel, thou hast come when most needed; we wanted some such pleasant guest to enliven our tedious beleaguerment. We have guests, too, fair and gentle guests, whom thy lays may chance to charm into forgetfulness that they are somewhile prisoners. We look to see thee grace our evening meal: see that thou disappoint us not."

The minstrel bowed lowly in reply, and the knight passed on; perchance the hours waned but slowly, despite the courteous attention he received on all sides. But at length he stood within the banquet hall of Stirling Castle, at length he glanced round the courtly crowd of knights and dames who occupied the dais, and there was a wild throbbing of sudden joy within his soul. They bade him sing, but slowly he obeyed, for he feared the quivering of his voice. There were many gazing upon *him*, but *he* saw but one, who sate somewhat back from the noble circle, her sable robes contrasting sadly with the gay dresses of those around her, though comporting well with that dignified and noble form, the sculptured beauty of those pale and pensive features. Beside her was a light and lovely girl of some seventeen summers, beautiful enough to have chained the eye and heart of any stranger, awake as was the minstrel to

such impressions ; but even her he saw not, save when he marked the sweet touching smile with which some remark she had made was met by her companion, the looks of love, of kindness lavished on her, and *then* he saw her, for he envied her position, envied the smiles which she received. The minstrel sang, and there was a pathos in his voice, an inspiration in his lays, and none there dreamed the wherefore. The jest was hushed, the laugh was stilled, for feelings were stirred within by the deep magic of the stranger's song ; and the whole frame of the minstrel quivered as he *felt* the large, dark, melancholy eyes of that noble prisoner fixed upon him, for *meet* them he dared not, and his head bent down upon his harp till his long hair veiled every feature from her gaze ; and thus the evening waned.

Two days within the given time Sir Amiot returned, and for some days the siege continued with little change to either party ; but at the end of a fortnight, the Scotch had obtained possession of the posterns commanding the underworks, and thus completely stopped the passage of provisions from the town, which had hitherto afforded the besieged more than sufficient supplies. The blockade, which had gradually closed around the castle, now became complete, closing up every avenue, and reducing the garrison to all the horrors of threatened famine. This was, in truth, an important advantage gained, and Edward Bruce already triumphed in perspective. He pressed the siege with renewed vigour and most intemperate valour, seconded by all his troops, whose joy at this unexpected success carried them even beyond their usual bravery. Sir Amiot appeared in a state of excitement scarcely attributable to the affairs of the siege, repeatedly alluding to the immense number of the garrison and prisoners within the castle, and declaring that the famine amongst them would be fearful.

"All the better," said Lord Edward ; "we shall starve them out the sooner ; they must surrender at discretion."

"But ere they do this, my lord, what will they not endure ? and the prisoners—the noble Scottish prisoners—how know we but in their desperation they may cut them off to lessen the number ? such things have been."

"Aye, but not under the sway of such a luxurious, effeminate king as the second Edward. Trust me, knights

and nobles take their stamp more from their monarch than they are aware of. Did Edward the Hammer rule in England, why his spirit would urge this Sir Philip to do even this—cut off his prisoners, his own men, did they dare murmur at privation, rather than surrender; but days are changed now, and I fear no such catastrophe.”

“But famine, exhaustion for English soldiery is of little moment; but for our captive countrymen, and some still less capable of enduring it, think of them.”

“And so I do; but what, in heaven’s name, ails thee, Amiot? thou hast grown most marvellously tender-hearted. By my father’s soul, were the thing possible, I could swear thy lady-love were prisoner in yon castle, and thou art thus anxious for her safety.”

“Thou hast said it!” passionately burst from Sir Amiot. “Oh, Sir Edward, she, whom for five long weary years I have sought in vain—whose life, whose liberty, whose well are infinitely dearer than my own—she lieth in thrall under my very eye, separated from me but by beleaguered walls. Oh, is it marvel, now that I have thus neared the goal, towards which I have so long and painfully struggled, striving against disappointment, failure upon failure, which none have known or dreamed of—marvel that my doubting soul should now tremble, lest that which it has thus sought should fade away beneath my very grasp? She is there, impossible as it seems. Oh, Sir Edward, give me, oh, give me but the opportunity to obtain her liberation ere it be too late.”

“And so I will, believe me; only be calm, and listen to reason,” he replied, too much astonished to inquire how Sir Amiot knew that which he affirmed. “How wouldst thou have me do this—take the castle by storm? Thou art too good a soldier not to see that is impossible, even for Edward Bruce’s erratic brain. The fortress is absolutely impregnable, and what would be the use of so squandering Scottish blood? No, trust me, this blockade will bring those caged birds to terms fast enough, too fast for the evil thou fearest to accrue. Edward is too harassed by his affairs in England to care much for Scotland, and this Sir Philip knows! so he is not likely to be so heroic as to sacrifice prisoners, garrison, and himself by a prolongation of the blockade. Let things rest as they are for the present.

and if at the end of fourteen days they have come to no terms, I pledge thee mine honour to resort to more active measures.

Sir Amiot was forced to be content, for, despite his fears as to the effect of this blockade on the comforts of the prisoners, his military experience acknowledged the justice of Sir Edward's representations, and he waited, with what patience he could, the issue.

Fortunately for his self-command he had not to wait long; Edward Bruce's idea that self-sacrifice was not even in Sir Philip's thought was speedily realized. A herald, with a white flag and properly escorted, appeared from the castle, demanding speech with the Lord Edward Bruce and his officers, on the part of Sir Philip de Mowbray, just seven days after the conversation we have recorded. A slight smile of triumph circled Bruce's lip, seeming a mischievous glance directed towards Sir Amiot, who was standing at his right hand, as the English knight was conducted to his tent, and speedily made known his mission. Sir Philip de Mowbray, acknowledging the great valour and marvellous successes of the Scotch under all who bore the redoubted name of Bruce, pledged himself solemnly and sacredly as his opponents could demand, to surrender the castle of Stirling, the ammunition, arms, and treasure thereto appertaining, without any fraud or diminution, on the following Midsummer day (it was now January), if by that time it were not relieved. If Lord Edward Bruce would agree to these terms, Sir Philip swore, by the honour of a knight, to adhere alike to the letter and the spirit of his pledge.

The pause of consideration was brief amongst the Scottish leaders. The rash yet daring spirit of their general was upon them all, and if they did think on the immense power of the sovereign of England, the great advantage the intervening period gave him in the preparation of an army, it was but of the increase of glory they should reap; many also believed the castle was as good as won, imagining Edward held it at too small a price to subject himself either to exertion or expense for its recovery. Unanimously, then, Sir Philip's terms were received and accepted; but when the hum of many tongues ceased, Sir Amiot stepped suddenly forward, and entreated a moment's attention.

"Tell Sir Philip de Mowbray," he said, addressing the

herald, "that his offered terms are accepted by these right noble and worthy representatives of Scotland and her king; but that there is one condition annexed, an important condition, on the acceptance or refusal of which *our* acceptance of these terms must depend. We demand the surrender, not alone of the fortress, ammunition, arms, and treasure, but that there shall be no removal of the Scottish prisoners therein kept in thrall; that all those now there, of whatever sex, age, or rank, shall there remain to wait the issue, and be given up with the castle, without ransom, charge, or condition whatever, as the lawful gain of our arms: let Sir Philip pledge himself to this, and we will accede unto his terms. My lords, have I spoken well?"

A shout of assent passed through the tent, amongst which Edward Bruce's voice waxed loudest.

"Aye, by my father's soul, thou hast, and I owe thee good thanks for that which 'scaped my memory!" he frankly exclaimed, striking his gauntleted hand on the table. "Repeat this to Sir Philip, sir herald, and tell him, an he accede to this, we offer him personal liberty, and free passage for himself, four knights, and ten men-at-arms, as he shall choose, to the court of Edward, to report the conditions we demand and the terms he has proposed. We bid him put some mettle in his poor, weak shadow of a sovereign, and urge him to send relief, for we desire not to gain the castle at such easy rate: we defy him to the field." The herald pledged himself to the correct delivery of this message, and with a low obeisance withdrew. The anxiety of the generals was great for Sir Philip's answer, none more so than Sir Amiot and Lord Edward, and it came at length. Sir Philip, the herald said, acknowledged he had determined to transport his prisoners to some place of greater security, as he scarcely felt himself authorised to deprive the treasures of his master of so large a sum as the rank of his prisoners might demand for their ransom; but, on due and weighty consideration, he had resolved on accepting the offered condition. If not relieved by the 24th of June, 1314, he pledged himself to deliver up with the castle, not alone the arms and treasures pledged before, but every prisoner, of whatever sex, age, or rank, the fortress now this day, 14th January, 1314, held in thrall.

All was now joy and triumph in the camp; the blockade

was removed, and Sir Philip speedily on his way to London, escorted to the borders with all honour by many young knights, burning with impatience for the issue of his journey. That there was any chance of defeat, any dream of failure, never entered into the thoughts of either soldiers or officers, and perhaps the first idea that the engagement entered into was not an overwise one originated in the grave aspect of King Robert's countenance, when, on his triumphant return from the Isle of Man, and instant visit to the camp, the fate of Stirling was reported to him. There was no timidity, no doubt, no fears as to the result; such could have no resting in the soul of Bruce, but it was scarce approval. He spoke, however, no such sentiment to his soldiers, but when alone with his brother and other leaders, expostulated earnestly and eloquently on the extreme rashness of the engagement. The labour of years, the toil and struggles of a whole nation, the weal of Scotland, nay, her hardly-won liberty, the prosperity of her sons, all were risked by one rash word. He bade them remember that England, Ireland, Wales, part of France, even of Scotland, would spring up at Edward's clarion call, and to them what had Robert to oppose?

"Your highness thinks, then, Edward will fight? By my father's soul, his kingly sire should rise from his grave to give me thanks for snapping the flowery garlands around his son, and giving him incentive to fight," was Sir Edward's reply, finding some difficulty in restraining his impatience before his royal brother.

"It is a great chance whether he do not," rejoined another leader. "I think he will deem Stirling Castle not worth the trouble or fatigue of buckling on his armour."

"So perchance Edward's self may think," replied the king, "but not so will Edward's subjects. My friends, I know the mettle of the English; that hath not departed with their warlike sovereign. A dozen English barons I could name would arm themselves and vassals, and march northward, with or without their king's consent, and Edward, effeminate and weak as he is by nature, would not submit to this. No, their spirit will act upon him, and he will wake from his lethargy to a full sense of the neglect and indifference of past years, endeavouring to atone for them by one sweeping blow, calling his whole dominions to his aid."

"And let him do so!" impetuously exclaimed Edward Bruce. "Robert, I know that in this thou speakest as the king and not the warrior; thou fearest for the weal of thy country and thy devoted subjects as a king perchance, 'tis right thou shouldst; but I tell thee no more ill will accrue from this than that thou wilt become possessed of treasure, prisoners, and glory. It will bring this continued struggle to a crisis; it will bring Scotland against England as she should be, in firm and bold array; and what signifies disparity of number? I tell thee, Robert, we shall win, and thou wilt yet thank me for entering into such engagement. Let Edward bring every man he has, and we will fight them, were they even more!"

King Robert looked on the kindling features of his brother, on his noble form, dilating with the passionate ardour of his words, and on the countenance of every knight and leader, then bearing in vivid light and shade the echo of such sentiments, and he could no longer control, by the more prudent maxims of the sovereign, the bold spirit of his race and of his knighthood.

"Since it is so, brother," he exclaimed, "manfully and fearlessly we will abide the battle, and call upon all who love us, and value the freedom of their country, to oppose this English king! Aye, though backed with the flower of his kingdom, though aided by knights from every state in Europe, for the rescue of this castle of Stirling, yet will we abide him, and bring him, if not force 'gainst force, the willing hands and dauntless spirits of the free."

CHAPTER XXXV.

"NAY, surely we have given thee time enow, lady, mine, thou canst not in conscience ask more," the King of Scotland said to the Lady Isoline, some five months after the conclusion of our last chapter. They were together in an apartment of the Convent of St. Ninian, where Isoline had chosen to take up her abode, her impatient spirit not permitting her to wait the issue of a battle for which the whole of Scotland had risen, sheathed in mail, even at the moderate distance of Edinburgh Castle. The Convent of

St. Ninian was situated rather less than two miles from Stirling, round which fortress for many a rood the Scottish army had gradually assembled, to the amount of nearly thirty thousand men; with them, however, as with the immense preparations and gorgeous armament of England, we have at this moment nothing to do, the fortunes of a young lady engrossing us rather more than the fortunes of a kingdom.

There was an unusual shadow on Isoline's beautiful face, which seemed to express an inward struggle, as unusual as its index on her brow. She was sitting on a low embroidered cushion, resting her elbow on her knee, her cheek upon her hand, her luxuriant hair somewhat less carefully arranged than usual, falling as drapery on her shoulders; the king, seated on a couch near her, had laid his hand caressingly on her shoulder, and seemed half-soothing, half-commanding. All their converse it is unnecessary to repeat; we will take up the thread which is woven with the future events of our tale.

"I looked to thee to give me courage to resist this unlooked-for tyranny of my father, and thou givest him thy support," resumed Isoline, without heeding the king's previous remark, and lifting up her face to his, gleaming sadly pale amid her raven curls. "Why must I marry? of what great importance is this poor hand, that it may not rest quietly in my own possession as I desire? Would to heaven I were a poor maiden of my native mountains, free to wed or remain single, as my heart might prompt."

"Truly I think a mountain maid's estate would scarcely suit thee, Isoline," replied the king smiling, "thou lovest state and power as the best of us."

"'Tis because I love power that I love not to resign it. Oh, my liege, why do me such wrong as to compel marriage? why may I not remain unwed?"

"Isoline," replied the king, seriously, "I pledged myself to thy father to reiterate his command, because it is mine own. Thou knowest, to behold thee the wife of Douglas has been for seven years my dearest wish; I can consent to its delay no longer. I will not have his happiness thus trifled with, the best years of his manhood wasted in the pursuit of devotion to a wilful girl, who is scarce worthy of him. Aye, look proud as thou wilt, fair niece, thy con-

tinued perverseness compels me to be thus harsh. What is there thou canst bring forward against the husband of thy sovereign's choice, thy father's wishes? Come, sum up the charge against him, that we may judge if in truth its foundation have some reason."

Isoline was silent.

"Doth he possess one single evil quality which can create unhappiness for a wife, abhorrence against himself? Speak with thy wonted candour, Isoline. Knowest thou aught against him, one evil quality which thou canst bring forward in his dispraise?"

"No," was the reply, in clear frank tones.

"Is there aught in his person or his countenance which your woman's fancy doth so dispraise as to affect your happiness?"

Another "No."

"Has his public or private conduct evinced any other spirit than that of a true knight and patriot, faithful to Scotland as to me?"

Again she answered "No."

"Has his pursuit of your fastidious ladyship been conducted other than most nobly and most honourably?"

"No."

"Notwithstanding all this, canst thou say then thou dost positively dislike him?"

"My liege, no."

"Then what, in St. Andrew's name, can either thou or I desire more?" exclaimed King Robert with some natural impatience. "Isoline, there can be but one cause for this positive rejection of a noble chevalier against whom thou canst bring no other cause than that, forsooth, thou feelest for him no romantic love. Thou hast given that little wilful heart unto some other; deny it not, for wherefore shouldst thou? An he be of birth and bearing, noble and faithful and open, as James of Douglas, I will forswear even my dearest wishes, and make thee his. Now wherefore weep, foolish girl?—dost thou so doubt thine uncle—do these words surprise thee? Speak out, give me the secrets of thy heart; an thou lovest one worthy of thee, and who loves thee so well as Douglas, I will urge no more against thy wishes—I would not give my Douglas; nor would he accept a divided or preoccupied heart; but an

thy refusal proceed from nothing more than girlish wilfulness and caprice, and love of universal dominion, my own hand shall conduct thee to the altar, and compel thee to become my faithful Douglas's bride."

The young lady was silent for many minutes after this speech; she had bent down her head so that the workings of her expressive features were completely concealed by her veiling hair; there was a wild tumult within she could scarce define, and certainly not control. Avow she refused Douglas because she loved another, and that other had given no cause for love, breathed not one word—save what she deemed chivalric gallantry—to say it was returned, nay, more, had given her cause again and yet again to believe his affections were engaged; from whose lips she had even distinguished words of impassioned love, addressed to one indeed incapable of returning it, but still its bearer, thus mystifying his conduct more and more—avow this, lower herself thus, when every day brought its chance of proving how vainly, fruitlessly, disgracefully to her own proud spirit, she had loved—Isoline do this, the haughty, independent Isoline—no, no, better her heart should break, her hand be pledged to another, then expose herself to this. Yet there was a struggle, a bitter struggle, for despite her pride, she *loved*; and wilfully to throw aside the offer of her king, reject her own happiness, was it well—was it wise? Yet whom did she love—would he reach the standard of perfection King Robert named—who could say his birth was noble? she could not speak his name.

"My liege," at length she said, composedly, though in a somewhat lowered voice, "I were indeed an ingrate to refuse acquiescence to your grace's will, thus kindly and generously offered; but a woman's heart, my liege, bears not the scrutiny of man. Bear with me a few weeks longer, give me at least the chance of other noble maidens, the choice of husbands. There are many noble and gallant youths in your grace's camp, desirous as Douglas for this hand, all worthless as it is; why should I do them the injustice of refusing them for one I love not better, though I grant him noblest, most deserving? Let some extraordinary deed of valour in the forthcoming strife win my hand and give me a husband; all then have equal chance hardly, for James of Douglas, as he loves me as he saith, will bear

down all opposition to obtain me, and I do therefore accede to your grace's wishes, even while I seem to waive them."

"'Tis scarcely justice, Isoline; he loves thee above all the others."

"How *know* I that, my liege? let him prove it, and without a question I will be his."

"But chance, fortune, the most untoward fates, may give thee to one far beneath thy rank."

"Not so, my liege; thou thyself shall mark the boundaries of birth and station—'tis a trial of love; not ambition. I speak but to those who pretend to value above all price my maiden hand, and let those only essay for it. Surely thou wilt not refuse me this, my royal uncle. Thou hast offered more to thy poor Isoline; she asks but this one more trial of Douglas's love, and if in truth he gain it, I pledge thee mine honour I will fulfil your grace's dearest wish—I will be the bride of Douglas."

"Then be it so, fair lady. Woman-like thou wouldst mark the extent of thy power, know thine influence on men's hearts, ere thou vowest thyself to one. Well, well, I will not thwart thee. Thou canst demand no proof of valour Douglas will not win; and perchance he would glory more in thus obtaining thee, in thus proving his devotion, than in winning thee in peace. It shall be as thou wilt. But when proclaim thy purpose—when give him this bright hope?"

"When the vast armies of which we hear so much appear, and we may judge what deeds of valour for our countrymen their ranks present. The evening of the day that marks them within sight shall hear this resolve. The day that sees the banner of England dashed down from Stirling Castle, the flag of Scotland there upraised, the English armies scattered like dissolving snow back to their native mountains, and Scotland wholly, firmly, gloriously free—that day shall see me betrothed to Douglas, an he win me, or to him that doth."

"I may not quarrel with thee, Isoline, for thy spirit is but too akin to mine," replied the king, gazing admiringly on the noble form of his niece, as she raised herself from her cushion, and stood loftily erect, every feature kindling with the enthusiasm of her soul. "Truly thou art a child of Scotland, inheriting thy mother's blood, and deserveth

that which thou demandeth. I accept thy pledge. My victory shall hail thee Lady Douglas, sweet one, and make thee dearer still," he threw his arm round her, kissed her brow, and left her. Isoline remained standing.

"Lady Douglas," she repeated, folding her hands upon her throbbing heart; "did I think so, dream so, better to have died. Have I indeed fooled away my happiness, cast it on a stake, certain ere 'tis tried? Yet, no, this will solve the dark and painful mystery. If he love me—he, the unknown, the nameless, the sworn—if he be free to love, will he not give me this proof—will he let Douglas win me—permit aught superior in valour to conquer him? Never! I have watched him: he is brave, dauntless, valorous as the young lion chafed into wrath; gentle, prudent. Oh, no, no; gallant, irresistible, as is the Lord of Douglas, if Amiot love me, be free to love, he will win me still, and if not, if my heart break, what matters? but it shall not; no, he shall not dream my weakness, he shall not dare to think I was mad enough to love," and she pressed her hands convulsively together, compressed that beautiful lip, under a passion of feeling which would have laid weaker natures prostrate in the dust. What passed in that woman's heart from the hour of that resolution until the moment of bringing it to proof we may not pretend to define; Isoline's character is now known to our readers, and her thoughts and feelings must be imagined accordingly.

On leaving Isoline, the king turned to the apartment of Agnes, who had also taken up her abode in the Convent of St. Ninian: the change from perfect unconsciousness to approaching sanity was becoming more and more apparent with every passing month; but, though equally certain, the waning of that fragile form was almost unperceived. She was standing, looking forth from the open casement on the broad campaign it overlooked. He approached gently, but she heard his step, and turned towards him with a smile that *thrilled*, for its source seemed deeper than the lip.

"I look for England, gentle Robert," she said, yielding to his paternal embrace, and laying both hands on his, "but she comes not yet. Alas! that rude feet and ruder spirits should stain yon beautiful plain."

"Yet wouldst thou not Scotland should be free?" inquired the king, startled by her words into the expectation of a collected reply. "Dearest, were Stirling ours, not a rood of earth, much less a walled and guarded castle, can our former tyrants claim."

"Free! King of Scotland, thou shalt be free, aye, thou and thy country. Said *he not* it would be, and did ever *his* words fail? but do not let us talk of these things, my poor brain reels again, and, oh, it is such pain to wake when these wild fancies gain dominion. I will not speak thus, I will not—no, Robert, gentle Robert; bear with me, it will pass—I shall soon be well."

She laid her head on his bosom, and he felt her tremble in his arms. He did not speak, but clasped her yet closer, yet more caressingly to his bosom, and the threatened suffering passed.

"Is it in truth memory that maketh me thus? she asked, sorrowfully. "There is some change upon me; life is not all present. Sometimes my soul looks back, and it is either one dark blank or peopled with such a dream of horror, I could cry aloud from very agony."

"Has that dream form, mine Agnes?" inquired the king, cautiously yet anxiously.

"Sometimes I think it hath. I seem pressed and hurried to and fro by a dark, shapeless crowd, struggling to escape some scene of horror; my eyes fix themselves on one I have seen but in air, one that was never upon earth; and, oh, merciful heaven, how do I see him?" She shuddered beneath the word. "But how can it be? it cannot be what men term memory, for that they say is of things which *have* been, and he, my beautiful, he never came to earth to suffer this; and then I see him not in air so often, though I *feel* him nearer yet, and there comes too a voice, bidding me prepare to join him. He will call me soon, oh, soon; he but tries my love till then. When Scotland is free, and thou art the king, he said, oh, he will call me to his heart, and we shall fly up together above all sound, all sight of earth; thou wilt not need him then."

The king could not reply, but his countenance betrayed the emotion her words produced.

"Thou wilt miss me, king, as men call thee. Oh, there are times when I feel as if I did not pay thee the respect

thy due, the homage paid by all else, and it seemeth as if the full meaning of king came to me, and I could kneel and reverence as others; but when I look upon thee, words my lips have framed depart, and Agnes only feels she loves thee, Robert."

"And only feel this, sweet one," fervently answered the king; "leave to others the homage of the knee. Enough, oh, 'tis a blessed enough, afflicted as thou art, to feel thou, whom he so loved, so cherished, canst still feel love for me."

Some time longer the king lingered with her; there was something about her words and aspect now that linked her yet closer to his manly heart, spoke yet more forcibly unto his love, and despite the dim prophesying of her clouded spirit, he never left her without feeling hope strong within him that she would wake from those twilights of her mind, and bless him with intellectual beauty still.

Nearer and nearer yet rolled over the whole south of Scotland the immense armament collected by Edward of England, or rather by the great vassals of his crown, for the relief of Stirling, or the redeeming of Sir Philip de Mowbray's pledge. Even as King Robert's penetration had declared, the remonstrances of his nobles had at length roused Edward to a sense of his long neglect of Scotland, to a sudden resolve to awake the might of his kingdom to regain her. The shout of war rang through the land: the last remnant of the first Edward's extensive conquests hovered on the chance of a single fight; its recovery opened anew a path of victory to England; its downfall placed the seal on Scottish freedom, pronounced her independent, glorious in the scale of kingdoms. The visit of Mowbray to court, the intelligence he brought, the sudden excitement of his nobles, aroused Edward from his dream of luxurious effeminacy to all the spirit and bravery of his father's son. He was not naturally a coward, and the exertions he now made somewhat lessened the scornful contempt with which he had been regarded by his barons. England, Wales, Ireland, even France, issued their warriors, the very flower of chivalry. No less than ninety-three great vassals of the crown brought out their whole feudal force of cavalry, consisting of forty thousand, every horse and every rider sheathed in mail; twenty-seven thousand in-

fantry were levied in England and Wales alone, and when collected at Berwick, within ten days of the appointed time, the whole army amounted to the almost incredible number of one hundred thousand. A spirit of excitement pervaded every rank. Robert the Bruce had proved himself no unworthy opponent for the bravest knights in Christendom.

The war was deprived of that brutal ferocity which had characterised the actions of the first Edward. Men marched northward, simply under the chivalric feeling that a castle was to be rescued—the question of English or Scottish superiority to be decided at a blow. Truly an incentive to gallant cavaliers, and one so powerful that the youthful Earl of Gloucester forgot this, his first battle, was against the brother-in-arms of his noble, still-lamented father—against the very man a father's lips had taught him to venerate and love.

Gilbert de Clare, that Earl of Gloucester whose conduct as the friend of Robert and the subject of Edward, must be familiar to our readers, had been spared the agony of thus marching direct against his cherished friend. He had been cut off in the prime of life, satisfied that his son retained in his noble-minded mother a guardian and a guide, who would well supply his place. And she could not bear to damp the excited spirit of her gallant boy, anticipating with unchecked ardour his first battle, by recalling against whom he was to raise his maiden sword; but yet she could not part with him, for her spirit was not at rest. Perhaps it was superstition, perhaps folly: but the shade of her departed husband seemed ever hovering around her, with a sad and gloomy brow, and she would have given all she most valued on earth, that her boy's first battle was against other than his father's friend: perhaps, too, there was another cause. Though the daughter of one king of England, the sister of another, her upright spirit ever told her the Bruce's cause was *just*, and her spirit, endowed with pious prescience, felt he would succeed; defeat would attend the arms of England, impossible as it seemed. The most truthful reports did not give Robert more than fifty thousand men, which as they neared Scotland dwindled into forty, then to thirty, till many a gallant baron was heard to grieve at the great disparity, declaring the victory they made sure of gaining would scarce be glorious, scarce

worth any exertion to obtain. But still foreboding was the heart of the Princess Joan, and urged by those mysterious impulses, which who of us has not in some time or other of his life experienced, she resolved on accompanying her son, on lingering with him to the end; and the young earl rejoiced, for he doated on her, and longed to throw his first laurels at her feet. His was not the age of prescience, save for rosy-coloured joy.

To this immense armament of England what had King Robert to oppose? Nought but willing hands and hearts, so nerved with freedom, that they had no dream of aught save victory. For five years victory, glorious victory had ever crowned the banners of their patriot king, and would she desert him now? No, it was the crisis of their country's fate; England had risen in arms but to feel to her heart's core the power of the free. Day after day beheld fresh reinforcements; men full of fiery valour, impatient to behold the foe, to strike the last link of slavery to the earth, to behold their country free; but yet, despite the patriot zeal, but thirty thousand warriors mustered round King Robert, tried they were in truth, but what were they compared to Edward's hundred thousand?

There was neither doubt nor tremor on King Robert's heart; but he was too good a general not to feel, and keenly, all the advantages of such very unequal numbers, and not only inequality of number; compared to Edward's forty thousand cavalry he had literally none, the fugitive warfare he had been compelled to adopt preventing all approach to the feudal tenure of other kingdoms.

The bow was no instrument to the Scotch, and the unerring English archer formed the greater part of Edward's infantry. These disadvantages would have been all-sufficient to have crushed even the most sanguine hopes, but it was not so with Robert. Difficulty with him did but seem to make him conscious of the unfailing resources of his own mighty mind, and he prepared with perfect coolness to overcome by stratagem what was impossible with force; how he succeeded the sequel will show.

But one advantage Robert possessed over and above his foes. He could choose his ground, and that choice evinced his consummate military skill. Partly open, partly shaded

by single or grouping trees, the New Park of Stirling offered a favourable space for the arrangement of his lines. A bog, called New Miln Bog, stretched between the Scottish battle-ground and the advance of the English. The brook from which this celebrated engagement took its name ran foaming and rushing between precipitous crags to the eastward, presenting an impregnable defence to the forces stationed near. Opposite to this was an extensive field of brushwood, offering, in *appearance*, an admirable ground for the operations of the cavalry, but in reality so excavated with rows of deep pits, as to give the earth the semblance of an immense honeycomb, and threatening complete destruction to the English cavalry. Westward, rose an eminence commanding a complete bird's-eye view of the whole plain, and divided into several craggy summits, one of which, rising just above the Convent of St. Ninian, and divided thence by a thick wood, looked also over Stirling. The convent itself and church adjoining lay directly in the path to the castle, and there were perhaps some amongst the sisters not a little timorous of their vicinity to a spot likely to be fiercely contested; by the one party, to throw succours into Stirling, and by the other to prevent it. The crag before mentioned commanded this path likewise, and on its giddy summit the beautiful form of Isoline Campbell was more than once perceived watching the progress of the English army, with an excitement as great as any of the youthful knights in her uncle's camp.

The evening of the 22nd of June found a gallant assemblage of knights and nobles in King Robert's pavilion. Lord James of Douglas and Sir Robert Keith, Lord Marshal of Scotland, had been despatched that morning, by King Robert's orders, to survey the rapidly-approaching English army; they had just returned, full of animation and excitement, which was speedily shared by their companions. The Lady Isoline and some of her attendant maidens were also present, and perhaps that circumstance increased the ardour of Lord James's words and sparkling vivacity of mien.

"How say you, look these gallant Englishmen?" inquired the lady, perceiving the conference between the king and his officers was over. "Fain would I list the tale from thy lips, my lord of Douglas, for truly ru-

mour doth speak such marvels my poor brain can hardly credit them."

"And for once ramour speaketh but the truth, believe me, lady," he replied, eagerly. "Scotland hath never seen a sight like this, even in her fairy dreams; beautiful and terrible to behold—appalling, while it fascinates."

"Appalling to James of Douglas?" interposed Isoline, with a smile.

"Nay, I speak figuratively, lady. Imagine a glorious array of moving warriors for a space of five square miles, the sun reflected from moving steel, dazzling the eye with one blaze of gold and silver on man and horse, so closely wedged they but seem one mass of gorgeous metal, whose ranks no glance can penetrate, no eye can reckon. Troop after troop roll on like the waves of a mighty ocean dyed in the sun's rays with every brilliant tint, on like a whelming deluge; over hill, and wood, and plain lances flash against the summer sky, a very wood of steel; bills and bows from thousands of infantry mingle with the knightlier ranks in terrible array, and threaten devastation. Oh, 'twas a goodly, glorious sight! one that stirred the very blood within me and bade my hand fly to my sword, as scarcely able to restrain it in its sheath."

"What! thou wouldst single-handed have encountered such a force, my lord? Truly, that were wise!"

"Lady, to have defined or tempered that moment's excitement was wholly vain; the very sight roused me out of my quieter self, till verily, I was scarce accountable for any mad deed I might have done."

"Methinks, then, it was well for my uncle the king that Sir Robert Keith was near thee."

"He! why the sight stirred his blood even as it did mine. Believe me, lady, his soberer age rendered him no whit calmer than myself."

"He speaks truth, lady, strange though it seem," continued Sir Robert, smiling.

"And King Edward—saw you the king?" asked many voices.

"We could only give a shrewd guess as to his position," replied Lord Douglas, "by the phalanx of gorgeously-clad knights, with all the magnificent banners of the great crown vassals, forming almost a canopy of rainbows; and

chargers—ha! many of them shall become Scotland's ere long; and the best and noblest shall be trained for thy use, sweet lady, an thou wouldst honour Douglas by such charge," he added, in a lower, more impassioned voice.

"Standards, ye have not named standards; are they numerous and gorgeous, as fitting the rest of this armament?" demanded Sir Walter Fitz Alan ere Isoline gave reply.

"Aye, by my father's sword! such standards as will adorn Scotland's palace walls for many a long year, and each one with its knightly guard, till they seem to rise from towers of gold or steel. The great banners of St. George, St. Edmund, St. Edward. The standard of every noble house of England, and pennons, streamers, pencnelles, of colours glowing as the hues of sunset, displaying pearls, and gems, and riches, which seemed emulous to arrest the sun's beams ere they rested on coats of mail."

"And each guarded, sayest thou?" inquired Isoline, earnestly.

"Aye, and will be on the battle-field. The capture of St. Edmund and St. Edward were almost a deadlier blow to England than the downfall of her army. Ah, lady, wouldst thou but speak the word, wouldst give me but the promise of one answering smile, one approving word, one hope that knightly valour might gain me the hand for which the devotion of a whole life were but poor return, how gladly would I penetrate the thickest ranks, the most impenetrable phalanx of England's noblest sons, to lay that banner at thy feet."

"Wouldst thou indeed do this, my Lord of Douglas?" suddenly interposed King Robert, who had neared his niece's seat. "Methinks, then, my gentle Isoline, this were the fitting moment for the proclamation of thy will, and nerve our gallant knights with double valour for the onset. What sayest thou, sweet one? Have I thy consent to speak?"

A deep flush mantled the cheek of Isoline for a single instant, and then faded into deadly paleness, but she bent her head in sign of affirmative, and the king continued, in his clear manly voice, turning the attention of every one within the tent even from the one engrossing subject.

"Young lords and knights of Scotland," he said, "all ye whose birth is noble, whose ancestry is loyal, whose knightly valour hath proved ye worthy of such brave de-

scant, and who bear on your shields nought that can tarnish nobility or present a barrier to an union with a daughter of the Bruce—in a word, ye amongst those who have any pretensions to the hand of the Lady Isoline Campbell, by that true, faithful, and chivalric love which should ever mark the devotion of a chevalier of high degree to a noble maiden, in all things worthy of that love, stand forth, and list the resolve which, as a true and patriotic daughter of Scotland, she, through us, her liege and loving sire, proclaims.

Amazed, yet bearing on their frank, open countenances such unequivocal marks of delight, of hope, that none could doubt their sentiments, no less than seven young noblemen of the first families of Scotland sprung forward from different sides of the tent, forming a close semicircle before the king and the lady, at whose feet Douglas was already kneeling, looking up in her face with such an expression of respectful yet devoted attachment, that that heart must indeed have been preoccupied to resist it; but that heart had sunk back upon itself as impelled by a weight of lead. Were these *all, all* who by manner, nay, by word, had evinced pretensions to her hand? her eye for a moment glanced almost wildly round. Was he whom it sought within that tent, and yet made no step forward even at such a call? What did it proclaim? Every knight and noble had gathered closely round the principal group, eager and wondering to list what followed; the words of the king passed like light from mouth to mouth. A martial form darkened the opening of the tent, from which the heat of the night had caused the curtains to be drawn aside. It was Sir Amiot; she saw him bend forward in earnest inquiry, followed by a quick almost convulsive start—a glance met hers, but that was all; she saw him fold his arms in his cloak, and remaining shrouded in the folds of the curtain, his eyes, she felt, fixed on her, but making no forward movement to take his station midst those hoping few. She forgot at that moment of deep agony one clause in her uncle's words, or perhaps had never dreamed that aught, in one so faithful to his country and his king, could tarnish his ancestral shield, and place a barrier between him and a Bruce. Perhaps it was well for her no such feeling came to prevent her awakened pride; nought but pride, the haughty, icy

pride of a soul such as hers could have sustained her at such a moment, strengthened her for the trial she had brought upon herself. Almost crushed beneath the intolerable agony of that moment—the belief she had been weak enough to love, and that love was unreturned—she arose calm, collected, a flush upon her cheek, in truth—but what was that but maiden modesty—her beautiful eye flashed, her rich voice faltered not one shadow in its deep, full tones.

“My gracious liege,” she said, “the love, the devotion, these noble lords have in all sincerity at divers times breathed into mine ear, demand my grateful thanks, and will, I trust, banish all unmaidenly freedom from my words; I have to each and all returned the same reply—the impossibility of love like theirs—the love of power and freedom, which, now mine own, I wished not to surrender. My lords, I pretend not to deny the first of these is still my own; the second I am willing to resign, an love be so great for me, that not alone will its bearer be content to receive me as I am, with no pretence of deeper feeling than sincere regard and willing word to seek the happiness of him alone who wins me; that he will adventure, in the great battle about to join, a deed of valour worthy of his own high merits and the lady whom he seeks. My lords, there are fearful odds against us. England cometh with her mighty bands as if to crush this mountain land, and by her whelming weight, ere a single blow be struck; yet do I—a child of the Campbell and the Bruce, a daughter of Scotland—avow my firm belief that not only will victory be ours, but glory more transcendent than hath yet beamed over Scotland—glory, from the king to the peasant, the noble to the serf. Believing this, then, I fear not, even in a battle on which the freedom of this land depends, to hazard my fate to a feat of arms, more befitting perchance the tourney’s sport than the terrible strife for life or death. The knight who lays St. Edmund’s banner at my feet shall have my hand, and all of heart ’tis mine to give, my true and faithful service for the time to come.”

A burst of irrepressible gladness broke from one and all of those most nearly interested, echoed by a heartfelt cheer of applause from those around. James of Douglas paused but to press the hand of the lady passionately to his lips,

and then sprung up with a loud exulting cry of joy, not even her presence could restrain.

"Mine, mine!" he cried. "When hath Douglas failed, and shall he now—now, with such a prize before him? Lady, sweet lady, I will lay St. Edmund's banner at thy feet, or bid farewell to life."

"And the prayers of thy sovereign go with thee, my Douglas," whispered the king, as he grasped the young warrior's hand, drawing him from the group, while, one by one, the youthful candidates for that glorious prize bent the knee before the lady, and pressed the kiss of acknowledgement and gratitude upon her hand; and came not *he* amongst them? He had departed from the tent; and did she need him? what cared she for the love of an unknown, when the devotedness of the noblest, the best lay offered at her feet? She tarried a brief while longer, returning with graceful courtesy, unfailing dignity, the many compliments of those around, and then rose to depart, refusing the escort of her devoted cavaliers; but with a kindness of tone and manner that excited love yet more, bade them farewell till the eventful strife was over, bidding them not for very wilfulness tempt life, that but one only might win, but for all she would retain regard and friendship, if as another's wife they wished it still.

The Lady Isoline walked slowly from the pavilion to the convent. A guard of honour ever attended her to and fro; but this night so irksome was their presence, she longed to burst away, and seek solitude and peace. Yet still she lingered on her brief way, as if seeking the mental pride and strength which with every step from the eye of man gave way. One moment she paused ere entering the woody alcove which led to the convent-gate; she had dismissed the guard, and sent forward her attendants, struggling for composure ere she met the inquiring gaze of the abbess and the sisters. Alas! for the continuance of that calm, the figure of a knight suddenly stepped from the deep shade and knelt before her.

"One moment, one little moment, gracious lady; oh, do not refuse it!" he exclaimed, the deep impassioned accents of that well-known voice betraying in a single instant how utterly fallacious was her dream of pride. "I will not tell thee all I have endured, all the deep agony the words of

the king have caused. I might not join the noble few whose shields, whose ancestral names bore no stain, no shade to sully their personal fame, and yet perchance when this dark veil be removed, for the sake of one valued by the king, even this might be forgiven, and thy precious hand not all forbidden me. Lady, not one of those who knelt before thee, vowing homage, love, that would bid them rush on death to win thee, can give thee a more devoted heart than Amiot's. Look not on me thus upbraidingly, thus doubtfully; a brief interval, and all, all shall be explained, trust me but till then; till, in my own proper person, my own unshrouded name, I lay the banner of St. Edmund at thy feet, or die. Speak, dear lady, but one word, give me but one sign to breathe approval, to permit my struggling with this gallant band, say but that, an I win St. Edmund's banner, the precious prize shall be mine own, and even Douglas's self shall quail before me; in the face of England and of Scotland, Amiot—the nameless, lonely Amiot—through death itself, shall win thee. Speak, speak, in pity; oh! might I breathe the love, the mighty love I bear, have borne thee, since first that smile of pitying kindness beamed like reviving dew upon my scathed and lonely heart, 'twould weigh perchance against the mystery around me—a few brief days will solve it. The impending strife, on which so much depends, gives me a name, dissolves this dark and hated veil—gives her to freedom whose hand unmasks my brow—fulfils the vow of years. Lady, sweet Lady Isoline, trust me but a brief while; say that I, too, may seek a prize, dearer how much than life!"

Isoline heard, and her limbs so trembled during this wild appeal that she was fain—foolish as it was—to lean against a stalwart oak for support. The revulsion of feeling, the sudden upspringing of that drooping heart, casting aside the leaden chains which one moment before had bent it down to earth, as by a sudden flash of dazzling radiance, dissolving them to nought, was more than even her spirit could control. Where now was the calm and dignified courtesy with which she had answered the impassioned Douglas? Did she now promise "all of heart she had to give?" we know not the exact import of her words, we only know there was something of a struggle with herself, less successful in controlling impulses than usual; that some-

thing must have breathed from her actions or in the music of her whispered tones certainly more than the maiden meant, that it could have emboldened Sir Amiot to an act which Douglas had not dared, to pass his arm round that lovely form, which yielded to his support, bend down his head, as to impress his quivering lips upon that pure and spotless brow, then suddenly pause, with the impassioned exclamation—

“No, not till my name be told—not till in the face of the whole world I may claim thee mine! I will not seal our compact thus; not one blush of pain shall stain thy cheek. Enough thy voice hath granted my boon—hath spoken words to lie on my heart of hearts, too blessed, too precious e’en for the winds of heaven to list, lest their faintest echo pass from me. If love may win, in the face of heaven, I’ll claim thee, sweet one! oh, trust me to the end.” He caught both her hands, pressed them again and again to his lips and heart, and vanished.

“Trust thee, aye, did an angel of heaven swear that thou wert false!” burst from Isoline’s lips, in a tone of such thrilling, cloudless joyance, she well-nigh started at its sound herself, so strangely did it clash with the whelming despondency she had lingered on that spot to conquer but a few brief moments before. Had flowers sprung up around her, or whence came those now laughing in the moonlight? What were those glistening lights on the emerald shrubs, the thousand stars in the deep blue heavens? Surely they had not been there before, for as she walked from the royal tent, the air had felt oppressive, and nought but cloudy mists were round her. She looked round one brief minute, but Nature’s self, all laughing as she was, seemed tame to the willing flood of gladness that had sprung up within her own heart, and she darted past with a step so light, it skimmed not touched the turf, impatient still for solitude; not to school that spirit to haughtiness and pride, but to give its full tide of love and gladness vent. What cared she for mystery more? enough that he had spoken—and she trusted, for she loved.

On nearing the king’s pavilion, which, for the purpose of calming his excited spirit, Sir Amiot had made a long circuit to avoid, eager voices met his ear, and hasty steps proclaiming that the monarch’s guests were severally de-

parting to their quarters. He was greeted with unusual animation, and so many spoke at once, he found some difficulty in comprehending them ; at length Edward Bruce's voice made itself intelligible.

"Peace, madcaps !" he shouted authoritatively ; "let this *chevalier solitaire* know what more has chanced ; somewhat, methinks, yet more interesting to him than all of you together. What, Sir Amiot, has kept thee aloof from the pavilion ? The king is not best pleased ; but I have not forgotten thee. Didst hear the Lady Isoline's proposal ? 'Tis a brave girl ! 'tis as good as accepting James of Douglas at once ; he will win her, without a rival. Didst hear all this ?"

Sir Amiot bowed in the affirmative.

"Then what, in St. Andrew's name, didst thou leave us for ? Afterwards, some bold youngster besought the king's permission to achieve a feat of equal daring, for the privilege of planting the Scottish banner on Stirling Tower, hurling down its rival, and giving liberty to all the prisoners there enthralled. Think of that, Sir Amiot. Thou shalt accomplish thy vow to the very letter ; give thy fair incognito freedom with thine own good sword, and dash that hated mask from thy face, as a good knight should. By heaven, I was only sorry the proposal did not come first from me ; but I supported it, believe me, with all my eloquence, thinking but of thee, and there thou standst, motionless as an inanimate piece of ice, without even saying gramercy for the thought. What ails thee, man ?"

"Pardon me, my lord, but I—I hardly understand thee," replied the knight, gasping for breath, conscious only that some dreadful thunder cloud was hovering over, to burst and crush the bright hopes of the moment before, and in that consciousness absolutely losing all comprehension of Lord Edward's words. "I—I have been—nay, my lord, pardon me, my brain is giddy ; I pray you speak again."

"Why, truly, that is not thine own voice, Amiot," resumed the Bruce, softened at once into kindness, and hurrying to the side of the knight, he drew his arm kindly within his own. "What has chanced ? Cheer up, dear friend ; my news will bring thee new life. Thou knowest these English barons never march to a battle, such as this will be, without

the sacred standards of St. Edmund and St. Edward in addition to the grand national banner of St. George. They imagine that no defeat can attend them while beneath these banners, and that taken they can never be. By God's help, we will tell them a different tale. Isoline has chosen St. Edmund's for her own especial prize, and has resolved whoever brings the banner of St. Edward to King Robert shall place the flag of Scotland on the ramparts of Stirling, give life and liberty to every Scottish prisoner, and conduct them with all honour and chivalry to their deliverer's feet. Gain thou this banner, and this privilege is thine—the vow of years fulfilled."

"And where, in what position is placed St. Edward's banner?" demanded Sir Amiot, in a tone scarcely intelligible, "near St. Edmund's; may they not both be gained?"

"Both!—art stark mad? what canst thou mean? Nigh together? Why, where is thy wonted generalship? No, no, these magnificent English barons are somewhat better generals than that; they place one in the left flank, and one in the right, that the tug of war may be equal—St. George's national standard thus doubly guarded. God's mercy, Amiot, what ails thee? thou art white and ghastly as yonder moonbeam on the water, and thy voice sounds hollow as if some evil spirit had possession of thee."

"I will go exorcise him, good my lord; give you good night," wildly exclaimed the unfortunate knight, breaking from Lord Edward's hold, and darting away in the direction of his tent, with a speed, a suddenness, startling his companions into the conviction his senses were disordered.

"Better not follow him, my lords, he will recover himself anon," interposed Malcolm, who, as usual, was at hand whenever his master, either absent or present, most needed him, and who did him essential service at that moment, by preventing the kindly intent of the Bruce and others to follow and relieve him. He, however, tarried not, save to see his advice was followed; but the first glance at his master convinced him that not even his presence could aid him now.

"To know thou lovest, and to lose thee thus!" burst at intervals from Sir Amiot's parched lips, as with fevered and irregular strides he paced the tent; "to see others win thee,

without the power of striking one blow in proof of that deep affection I do bear thee. Merciful heaven, must this be—am I bound to do this? Is not her freedom gained without it—my vow fulfilled? What have I sworn—what, Holy Virgin, called on thee to register in heaven? To seek her liberty, life, joy, above all things on earth; to sacrifice all of self, of selfish happiness for her who so loved me; to let nought interfere with this one grand object of my life, at the sword's point, through fire, through water, through every horrible shape of death, to give her freedom, if only thus it could be gained; and do I pause now—permit even a thought of others to win a privilege, that were there not another yet more precious, I had moved heaven and earth to gain? More precious, mother of mercy! is there, should there be aught more precious to a son than the life, the liberty of a much-injured, devoted, glorious mother? Shall I see others tamely win thee, content that this victory will give thee freedom? Shall I not be perjured, dishonoured as a knight, ingrate, rebellious, lost to all affection, every duty as a son? I will not, I cannot. Mother I will gain thy freedom; I will win the power of flinging open thy prison-gates, casting off the chains, which for eight long weary years thou hast worn in misery; I will do this, though it cost me more than life! Isoline, Isoline, oh God, *must* I lose thee?"

He flung himself on the ground, and writhed in the wild agony of that last thought. The cold, measuring judgment of the present day can form little idea of the mighty agony, the overwhelming bitterness of that trial; the power, the weight of the chain which the vows of chivalry threw around their subjects. The freedom of the Countess of Buchan was certain, whoever gained the recompense offered by the chivalric king; but her son would have stood perjured and dishonoured in the sight of men, as in his own heart, had he permitted aught of personal consideration to permit that recompense being awarded to other than himself. Malcolm knew this well, and therefore he stood silent, full of sympathy, but proffering no word, for what could he advise?

At length Sir Amiot, as though a light had burst upon his soul, sprung from the ground in an ecstasy of renewed hope.

"And why may I not win her still?" he exclaimed. "Were the standards on opposite sides of the broad earth, or the one in heaven, the other in hell, I will win them both! Mother—Isoline—I will win both—both; ye shall both be mine!"

On, on came the mighty armament of England. Early on the morning of the 23rd, intelligence was brought King Robert of their march from Falkirk, and, without a moment's delay, the patriot sovereign drew forth his rejoicing troops, to form them in the line of battle on which he had resolved. The drums rolled to arms; the silver clarions and deeper trumpets echoed and re-echoed from various sides, and under each the gallant soldiery sprung up around their respective leaders. Torwood seemed suddenly awake with animated life; from every glade, from every nook they issued; till they stood in presence of their sovereign in three compact and steady lines. Mounted on a small but strong-built pony, in complete armour, distinguished, alike by friend and foe, by a rich coronet of chased gold around his helmet, whose vizor was up, and his noble and eloquent countenance shaded only by long, waving ostrich plumes of snowy whiteness, the Bruce returned, with grave and graceful dignity, the salutations of the troops, as they passed him to their ranks. He rode slowly along the line once and again, and then he paused, and a deep, breathless stillness for a brief minute prevailed. It was broken by his voice, clear, sonorous, rich, distinguished for many paces round.

"Men of Scotland," he said, "we stand here on the eve of a mighty struggle. Slavery or freedom are in the balance; misery or joy hinge on the result. I hesitate not to avow there are odds, fearful odds against us. England hath more than treble our number; but, soldiers, your monarch fears not—the fewer men, the greater glory! We shall win, we shall give freedom to our country, fling from us her last chain, crushed to atoms, into dust, and to do this, what do we need?—bold hearts and willing hands, and those who have them not, let them now depart. Friends, subjects, fellow-soldiers, if there be any amongst ye whose hearts fail them, who waver in their determination to conquer or die with Robert Bruce, I give ye liberty, perfect liberty to depart hence. Our hearts are not all cast in the same mould, and if there be any excuse for wavering spirits,

men of Scotland, behold it in the whelming flood that England's power hath gathered to appal us. Be this proclaimed; I would not one hand should stay whose heart hath failed."

The king paused, and on the instant above a dozen trumpets sounded, followed by the proclamation of the words of the Bruce. His eagle eye flashed as it glanced on that patriot band, and well was its trust fulfilled. Scarce had the echoing trumpets ceased to reverberate, the stentorian tones of the heralds hushed, when the wild cry of confidence, of love, of fidelity to death, burst from every lip, so loud in heartfelt enthusiasm, its echo startled the myriads of Edward with its sound.

"To the death, to the death, we will abide with thee!—thy fate is ours, whatever it may be—victory or death—we will share it! Death hath no terror when thou art by. Victory shall be ours, for 'tis the Bruce that leads; with thee we live or die!"

So shouted the warriors of Scotland; the meanest soldier caught the words, and echoed and re-echoed them with such tones of fervour, trust, and loyal love, the Bruce thrilled and softened even at that moment almost to woman's weakness: rank, order, military discipline, all were for the time forgotten. In the centre of his soldiers, the Bruce permitted their excited feelings full vent; they hailed him sovereign, friend, and father—besought his blessing, and answered it by reiterated blessings on himself. A few minutes, seeming almost hours, so intense was the excitement, this lasted, and then as by magic—calmed, silent, disciplined as before—they fell into their ranks, and waited the orders of their king. Three oblong columns, armed with long stout lances, in equal front, formed his first line. To his brother Edward was intrusted the right wing; James of Douglas and Sir Walter Fitz-Alan, High Steward of Scotland, headed the left; and Randolph, now Earl of Moray, the centre. Resting on the precipitous banks of the turbid brook of Bannockburn, the approach to the Scottish right wing was completely inaccessible. The left, on the contrary, appeared bare and dangerously open, but was in fact protected by that excavated honeycomb already described, whose destructive powers were further increased by the number of calthrops or spikes, destined to

lame the English cavalry, scattered about. These leaders, Randolph in particular, as his central band more particularly covered the road to Stirling than either flank, were commanded to prevent all attempt to throw succours within the castle. The king reserved to himself the command of the second line, which, forming one columnar mass, consisted of the men of the Isles, under their chief Angus, from first to last devoted to the Bruce, his own personal followers of Carrick, with those of Argyle and Cantire, and a select and gallant body of horse, amongst whom were many of the young aspirants for the two proffered rewards. Their own eager spirits led them to desire posts in the van, but they listened to and believed their king's assurance that he would give them better opportunity for the exercise of their valour than did they join the wings. To James of Douglas, too, a post in this troop had been assigned, Robert disclosing to him his plan with regard to their service more fully than to the others, and acknowledging he feared that, as a general, his attempts to reach the banner might be liable to interruption, but Douglas would not listen to this suggestion.

"I must not listen so to my own interests as to forget those of your highness," he said, with a frank smile; "I will do my duty as commander, and yet find ample time for the feat of a *preux chevalier*, and let my friends yonder rest on the honour of a Douglas. I strive not for St. Edmund's banner, till the signal of your highness gives them equal fortune with myself."

One other charge demanded the Bruce's attention, and then his plan of operations was complete. Every menial follower of the camp and baggage, with the wives and children of the soldiery, amounting altogether to some hundreds, were despatched to the eminence we have elsewhere named, giving them a view of the engagement, thus removing all the confusion of so large and undisciplined a multitude wholly from the principal actors of the day: a plan proving of infinitely more advantage to the Bruce than, at the time of its formation, he at all imagined.

About four hours, afternoon, of the same day, the 23rd, the vanguard of the English came in sight; standard and pennon, banner and plume, of every stage and gorgeous material, gleamed in the sunshine, as moving pavilions, ere their bearers could be distinguished. The Bruce, riding

forward, his lightning glance seeming to rest on every point at once, fancied he perceived a large body of men detaching themselves from the main body of the English, and advancing cautiously through some low marshy grounds in the direction of the castle.

"Ha!" he shouted, in a voice that called the attention of his leaders at once. "Randolph, Randolph, there is a rose fallen from thy chaplet! See yon cloud of dust and lances; they have passed your ward."

"But gained not the goal," answered Randolph, the red flush of indignation mounting to his cheek, "nor shall they, my liege; though the rose be fallen, its thorn is there. Follow me, men!" and with about fourscore spearmen he dashed onward, halted in the spot the English must pass, and, in that compact circle of three-lined pointed spears—one rank kneeling, the next stooping, the last upright—which Wallace had introduced, awaited the charge of eight hundred horse.

"In heaven's name, my liege, give me permission to go to his assistance!" burst at once from Sir Amiot and Douglas's lips, at the same moment urging their horses full speed to the side of the king. "He is lost; and he have not relief, he must perish. Yonder are more than ten to one. In St. Andrew's name, give the word, and let us forward to the rescue."

"It may not be," replied the Bruce, calmly, "Randolph must pay the penalty of his own folly; I cannot change the order of battle for him." But Douglas and Amiot could not be so turned from their generous purpose; they continued to plead, until a softening of the king's countenance induced them to act as if the words of consent had been extorted from him, and followed by about a hundred men, the knights, side by side, rushed forward to his rescue. Already Clifford's men had charged full speed Randolph's devoted band, but ere their friends had approached within spear's length of the scene of conflict, the English cavalry, unable to penetrate the sharp phalanx presented to them, had fallen back in such complete disorder, as to convince them Randolph needed no rescue; on every side they rolled back—to use the expression of that Scott, to whom Scotland owes so much—like a repelled tide, amid whose retreating waves Randolph's men stood like a stubborn rock. Horses

speared and terrified, fell, crushing many a gallant knight beneath them, and effectually barring the onward charge of their companions; while, without the slightest change in rank, position, or steadiness, Randolph's patriot band remained. With a simultaneous movement, Sir Amiot and Douglas checked their chargers. "Gallantly done, Randolph!" they exclaimed, the noble spirit of chivalry predominating even over its rivalry. "He hath won, gloriously won. Back! he needs us not; to stay would but tarnish his glory," and they returned to their ranks, followed within half an hour by the Earl of Moray and his followers, without the loss of a single man.

"Nobly retrieved, my Randolph!" exclaimed the king, spurring forward his palfrey to meet his nephew. "The rose but drooped, it hath lifted up its head again, blushing with new honours; we hail it as a bright omen of to-morrow." The warrior bent his head to his saddle-bow, his cheek crimsoned with very different emotion to that which had flushed it before, and the shout with which his men answered the king's gratulation gave no token of the exhaustion which for the moment their herculean efforts had produced.

Crestfallen and disappointed, Sir Robert Clifford, with his discomfited troops, returned to the main body. A superb pavilion had already been raised for the accommodation of King Edward, whom the intense heat of the weather and the fatigues of a long march, encountered in full armour, a dress to which the delicate limbs of the monarch were little accustomed, had slightly discomposed; and a gorgeous scene it presented, with its lordly inmates glittering in radiant armour, flowing plumes, and surcoats of thick silk, velvet, and brocade, heavily embroidered, in gold and silver, sometimes in gems, with the devices of their wearers. They were all mostly tall, strongly-built frames, well adapted to their martial costumes, with countenances bearing that stamp of innate nobility which the rules of chivalry so fostered and improved, diversified indeed, but, taking them all in all, noble specimens of the nobility of their land. Close by the monarch's side, richly attired, and adorned with gems, was the court minstrel, whom Edward, confident in his victory, had brought with him to celebrate his triumph. Animated converse was passing

amidst the nobles, participated sometimes by the king, but more confined to themselves, as their topics, more of war than minstrelsy and the softer dreams of life, accorded little with the monarch's general mood. The curtains of the pavilion were drawn widely back, so that Edward and his nobles had a full view of the field before them, and all the operations of the Scottish army, in the front of which the form of Robert Bruce was plainly to be seen, caracoling on the small horse he rode. Deep in the back shadows of the tent the young Earl of Gloucester was standing by his mother, sometimes speaking animatedly, but oftener more silent and thoughtful than usual. There was an anxious tearful affection gleaming in the princess's eyes, as they rested on his young and graceful form, showing forth the beauty of its proportions through the exquisitely light and flexible suit of Milan steel which he wore, unencumbered by the usual surcoat which distinguished his companions.

"Wherefore hast thou forsaken the bearings of thy rank, my son?" asked the princess, more to break the silence which had fallen on them than from real curiosity. "Methinks thou art scarce habited as thy father's son."

"Nay, mother, look on this splendid suit of steel, methinks thou wilt scarce find its equal amid my more gorgeously-decked companions," he replied with a smile; "an thou admirest it not, beshrew me, gentle lady, I shall quarrel with thy taste."

"And thou mightst with justice, Gilbert; but in this, thy first engagement, should not thy noble rank be displayed in the eyes of all men? Think who thou art—Earl Gilbert's son and Edward's nephew."

"The first is all-sufficient, mother," answered the young man, proudly. "I am prouder as Earl Gilbert's son than were I king of England, not his nephew, and for that father's sake I wear not Gloucester's bearings in the fight to-morrow. My father would not; he would shrink in suffering from meeting one he so loved in deadly strife as Bruce, though loyalty to Edward compelled him to the field, and men shall not say his son forgot these things."

The Countess of Gloucester looked on her noble boy, as mournfully yet firmly he uttered these words, his father's spirit glistened in his eyes, and the tears, which had strug-

gled for vent before, now fairly fell; he bent down and kissed them from her cheek.

"These were not always thy thoughts, my son," she said, when voice returned; "what hath recalled them now?"

"My father's self," replied the young earl, solemnly. "Start not, dearest mother; in truth I did not think enough of him against whom my maiden sword must first be raised. I thought but of the animation, the excitement, the glory we might reap; I thought but of the battle, the delight of giving my sword its longed-for freedom, in the service of my sovereign. But yesternight, in the visions of deep sleep, I looked again upon my father."

"Was it sleep, my son?" interrupted the countess, her cheek blanched with the intensity of her emotion.

"It might not have been, yet so it seemed, my mother; it was not the thrilling awe with which methinks I should have gazed upon his semblance had it palpably appealed to waking sense. I had slept soundly it seemed, exhausted by continued marches, when gradually that sleep became less and less deep, as if the folds of unconsciousness in which my soul was wrapt were one by one unturned, and left the immortal spirit bare, and purified for commune with its kindred essence passed above. I knew not where I was; but a shadowy cloud for a brief interval hovered like a silvery mist around me, subsiding gradually into the noble proportions, the majestic figure of my father. I sprung up, I knelt before him, struggling to speak, but without the power, yet it was more intense delight at gazing on his face again than awe. He looked upon me, methought, mournfully, and pressed his hand on my brow, pushing back my hair, as to look more fully on my face, 'Would, would it were not against the Bruce that thou must march, my noble boy,' he said, solemnly and distinctly, 'and yet thy father's spirit will hover round thee even then; raise not thy hand against him, his cause is *blessed*, let not his eye trace thee. My blessing on thee, Gilbert; soon, soon we shall meet again.' Ha! what means this—what is going on there?" continued the young earl, suddenly interrupting himself, roused even from this tale by the sudden animated bustle round the king, and partly perhaps with the wish to

shake off the emotions of awe creeping over him, partly to give his mother more opportunity to regain the control which had almost deserted her at this painful corroboration of her own dim forebodings; he gently disengaged her almost unconscious pressure of his arm, raised her hand to his lips, and hastened from the tent. "What, in St. George's name, means this?" he demanded. "Where goes Sir Henry de Bohun in this hot haste?"

"Like a loyal subject, to end the war at a single blow," replied Edward, with some animation. "He goes to do a goodly service to England, to us; and the saints speed him."

"Mean you he goes against the Bruce? 'tis shame, foul shame to knighthood, an he doth! it cannot be."

"To the devil with thy squeamishness, Gloucester!" retorted one of the elder barons; "all is fair in a strife like this."

"Fair, armed as he is, and on such a charger, against one alike unprepared to receive him, and on a steed that must fall at his first thrust. Shame, shame on thee! Hereford, Arundel, for the honour of knighthood, prevent this. We are dishonoured, a hundred times dishonoured, an we let this be," and the young earl darted from the tent, followed by the earls he had named, who, like himself, felt the dishonour of the deed, but as they hoped to prevent Sir Henry's advance, they were too late. Mounted on a superb charger, fresh, and pawing the ground with impatience to spring forward, a tall, powerful, almost gigantic man, armed from head to foot in burnished and gilded armour, his vizor closed, his lance, the length and thickness of a young palm, headed with sharp steel, couched for the charge, Sir Henry de Bohun gave his steed the spur, and rushed with such lightning swiftness across the intervening ground against the Bruce, that those who had marked the movement held their very breath in the intensity of anxious suspense. Gloucester, uttering a cry almost of despair, remained arrested in his flying progress, one arm raised, one leg advanced, watching in absolute agony the effect of an encounter he felt to his heart's core must be fatal to the Bruce; his fears were needless. Calm and collected, as if no danger threatened, the King of Scotland sat his palfrey, giving no sign of preparation or even of consciousness of

his foe's approach, save that the fiery glance of his eye never wavered from his movements. On came the mighty warrior, on, on; his lance must bear down the patriot king; man and horse must fall together pinioned to the earth—on, on; they near, they meet—no, not meet; the palfrey, faithful to his master's hand, swerved aside. De Bohun, carried on by the impetuosity of his steed, passed the mark, but no farther; the terrible battle-axe of the Bruce raised in air, flashing one moment in the sun, then fell, and cloven from his helmet to his throat, the force of the blow shattering the battle-axe into a hundred glittering fragments, Sir Henry de Bohun fell dead to the ground, his terrified charger rushing wildly to the ranks he had but five minutes previous left in pomp and pride.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THERE was deep silence on the plain of Bannockburn—silence, as if not a breathing soul were there; yet, when the shrouding drapery of night was drawn aside, when the deep rosy tint of the eastern skies proclaimed the swift advance of the god of day, what a glorious scene was there. Both armies were drawn forth facing each other. The vanguard of the English, composed of the archers and billmen, under command of Gloucester and Hereford, forming an impenetrable mass of above twenty thousand infantry, with a strong body of glittering men-at-arms to support them, occupied the foremost space, directly in the rear, and partly on their right; the remainder of the army, consisting of nine divisions, completely covered and so straitened by the narrow ground on which they stood, as to present the appearance of one immense body, from which, as they slowly rolled forward towards the Scots, the rays of the morning sun played so dazzlingly on the gleaming armour, the unsheathed steel, the glittering spears, that ever and anon flashes of vivid light, as the blue lightning of heaven, darted through and round the lines; a sea of plumes formed the shadowy background of their gleaming flashes, effectually aided by the heavy canopy of countless banners floating above them, far too numerous, too closely mingled, for

many devices to be distinguished. In front of this immense mass, and slightly in the rear of Gloucester's infantry, stood a regally-attired group of about four hundred chevaliers, in the centre of which, gallantly mounted and splendidly accoutred in golden armour, his charger barded in unison, bearing himself in very truth right royally and bravely, as the son of his father, the monarch of England sate, his white and crimson plumes falling from his golden helmet in thick masses to his shoulder. On his right hand rode the celebrated crusader, Sir Giles de Argentine, and on his left Sir Ingram Umphraville, an equally celebrated English baron, while to Aymer de Valence, Earl of Pembroke, already mentioned in this eventful history, was intrusted the command of the monarch's body-guard, the four hundred men-at-arms, thus gathering round his own person a host of chivalry, unmatched in valour and in fame, save by the one mighty spirit who led the opposing troops. Directly behind the king, and in the centre of his knightly guard, waved the heavy folds of St. George's standard; the situation of St. Edmund's and St. Edward's will be noticed hereafter.

There was no change in the Scottish line; it occupied exactly the same position as of the preceding evening, save that King Robert, now mounted on a war-horse, magnificent in proportion, though almost gigantic in size and superbly barded, to suit the rank of his rider, had changed his position from the front of his lines to the spot commanding the second line, close beside the Lord of the Isles and the men of Carrick; concealed by these, but so near as to be ready for instant obedience to the signal of the king, stood a body of horse, and on these, though he spoke it not, Robert depended much for the ultimate glory of the day.

The English army paused on their whelming way, halted to a man; the trumpets sounded their brazen clamour—the echoes of hundreds and thousands of hoofs ceased to reverberate on the ground. Silence had fallen on that mighty multitude, a sudden thrilling stillness, like the awful hush of nature ere the bursting of a storm. It was at that moment a form was visible on that craggy summit rising midst the woods of St. Ninian's, visible to all; for from that point the whole battle-plain, with its opposing armies, lay

clear as a map, displaying every nook of ground, every movement of each army, without one hidden point—there stood that form, its dark drapery distinctly traced against the summer sky, visible to all, but noticed only by a few. Was it the near advance of the foe, the nearing of that eventful moment, the strife for victory or death, which caused two hearts within King Robert's army to throb almost to pain—the Lord of Douglas, Sir Amiot of the Branch? both had looked on death, had hoped for victory too often and too long for this. But not yet could the form of the Lady Isoline Campbell meet their glance—yet find those hearts unmoved, one doubting glance; for could it be—could it indeed be Isoline? It was but the doubt of the moment, for they knew hers was not a character to remain in passive endurance at the altar's foot. She could face danger, she could gaze on death, and she would witness the fate of her country, watch the progress of her own, whatever it might cost her, rather than *wait* as others, calmly, passively, the result. Both warriors knew this; and if Douglas had needed further incentive to the superhuman efforts he had inwardly sworn to use, that glance had given it: prouder he sate his charger, more loftily erect, and there was a glowing spirit of heroism in his soul, that might not speak defeat.

And how, felt Sir Amiot? Still, graceful as a sculptured statue, he sate his horse, whose sable hide, unspotted by a single hair of white, seemed well adapted to the dark, sombre armour of his master; the vizor of the helmet was of course closed, its heavy raven plumes lay resting on his shoulder, scarcely moving, so perfectly motionless was the attitude of the knight, by the breeze that so softly and revivingly swept by. His answers to his sovereign's animated converse had been so soldierlike, and to the point as usual, that Robert dreamed not the thoughts at work within that manly breast, guessed not how wholly, how painfully they were engrossed. The knight gazed upon that beautiful form, looked as an enthusiast votary on the idol of his adoration, and he felt that midst that multitude her heart's gaze was upon him; yet how dared he rejoice it was so? A sickness as of death crept over him; she was there to witness *his* efforts to obtain her, to bless him with

the encouragement of her angel presence—and what would she behold? Oh, who may speak the agony of that one moment, crushing his very soul; he felt as if his whole frame were bowed before it to the earth, on which he almost wished to lay when that fight was over, midst the glorious dead. She might weep for him then. Despair was on his heart—black, cold, nerveless despair. Yet hope struggled up from the turbid chaos; he would triumph, still triumph! and the banner of St. Edward waved in air, divided from St. Edmund's by the whole extent of the intervening line, the one at the extreme right, the other at the extreme left, presenting insuperable obstacles to his ambition, rendering the very dream of gaining both the mad coinage of an unsettled brain.

The Lady Isoline gazed on the scene beneath her, for the first moment so wholly wrapt in a species of thrilling awe and exciting admiration as to lose entirely the recollection how much her own happiness depended on the event. She heard not the half-timorous, half-suppressed exclamations of wonder, admiration, and terror, breaking in a strange medley from her companion, an attendant who had conquered her own fears of a battle rather than her beloved lady should look on such a sight alone. For one minute Isoline Campbell was an enthusiast, a patriot—seeing nothing, feeling nothing but the glory of her country, the danger to which it was exposed—the belief, conviction, certainty she would triumph over all; the next she was but a woman, a loving woman, seeing but one amidst that wondrous mass, trembling lest she had exposed him unto death. Why did he not look up, give one sign he saw, he felt her presence? one moment she thought thus, the next reproached herself for wishing one thought apart from Scotland at a moment such as this.

Suddenly, and so simultaneously it seemed but the movement of one man, the followers of her uncle, the assembled troops of every class and every line, sunk one knee to earth; plumes mingled with the manes of the chargers, as every helmeted head bent down in lowliest adoration. A half shout of exultation seemed waking from the English ranks, as if they deemed it was in acknowledgement of their superiority this lowly homage was paid; but speedily the shout sunk into murmurs, then died away as the cause of this un-

expected movement became visible. Bareheaded, barefooted, his silver crosier in his aged hand, Maurice, Abbot of Inchaffray, in full canonicals, followed by five monks, slowly and majestically passed before the Scottish lines, in loud, unfaltering tones pronouncing his blessing on their brief though fervidly-breathed orisons, and on their patriotic purpose. There was no tremour in his step, no faltering in his voice, and struck with admiring awe, the English hushed the signal for the onset on their very lips.

Isoline watched the progress of the venerable man with an intensity of interest that checked the words of prayer, though they had language in her heart. He passed from her sight; the warriors sprung from their kneeling posture; the knights sat anew, erect and firm, on their pawing chargers. A hundred trumpets sounded from the English line, followed by a rush like thunder, and a discharge of arrows so thick, so close, the very air was darkened; they dispersed, and again the whole field was visible to Isoline. Onward, in full career against Edward Bruce's left wing, the Earls of Hereford and Gloucester rushed: but one glance sufficed to prove somewhat had chanced to discompose their steady union, and that they had rushed forward to the charge with infinitely more of rivalry than order. Again and yet again they strove to penetrate the solid ranks of the Scottish spearman; horses rolled on the earth, flung headlong back by the massive spears, leaving their masters, often unwounded, to the mercy of their foes. Fearlessly and valiantly the earls struggled to retrieve their first error, and restore order to their men-at-arms. Indignant, almost enraged, Gloucester fought like a young lion, and little did his enemies imagine the youthful knight, whose mighty efforts excited even their admiration, was the very noble for whose safety their monarch was so anxious, that almost his last command had been to spare the Earl of Gloucester.

Meanwhile, taking advantage of this confusion, Douglas and Randolph, at the head of their respective divisions, attacked with skill and admirably-tempered courage the mass of infantry, who stood bewildered at the unexpected discomfiture of the body they had looked to for support; the charge, however, roused them to their wonted courage, and they resisted nobly. Again the archers raised their deadly

weapons to the ear, and again the air became thick with the flight of arrows, longer, heavier, more continued than before. Their effect was too soon perceived in the ranks of the spearmen; many places left void, which had received unmoved the charge of the men-at-arms. Quick as the lightning flash, King Robert darted along the line. "Now then, Sir Robert Keith, on for Scotland—the Bruce and liberty!" he shouted; and quick as the words were spoken, the Marshal of Scotland, at the head of four hundred men-at-arms, wheeled round full gallop, and charged the English bowmen in the flank and rear with such vigour and precision, as speedily to turn them from their fatal attack upon the Scots to their own defence—a defence which, as they had no weapons save their bows and short hangers, was of little service, ill-conducted, and of no effect against the cavalry; they fell in numbers, and thicker and thicker waxed the confusion and the strife. It was now the Scottish archers' turn to gall their adversaries, the flight of arrows fell swift and true; and still, despite the vigorous proceedings of the Scottish troops, the greater part of Edward's mighty army remained wavering and uncertain in their position. Now and then a body of gallantly accoutred horse rushed forward, joining indiscriminately in the *mêlée*, but neither order nor steadiness marked their movements. Edward himself indeed proved worthy of his high descent; his white and crimson plumes waved alternately in every part of the field, marking that no lack of personal bravery was there, though the talents of a general were either much needed, or the confined and unequal ground utterly frustrated effectual movements of the horse, and rendered the greater strength of Edward's army literally useless.

The Bruce had returned to his post; his eagle glance moved not for an instant from the field. Order had disappeared from the English ranks, their massive bands broken through and through, tottering, falling like gigantic columns shaken by mighty winds; while firm, cool, inflexible, the bodies of the Scotch rushed amongst them, dealing destruction at every step, proving superiority, valour, strength, in the very face of numbers. Straggling wavering troops from the main body of the English still joined the scene of action, imagining by force of numbers to turn the day. All was confusion: the clash of arms; the rush of horse; the heavy fall

of hundreds, in their onward charge, in the pits prepared; knights rolling on the sward, receiving death often from the hoofs of their own steeds ere the avenging sword-stroke of their foes.

"See, lady, see the gallant Douglas, how gloriously he bears himself!" at length exclaimed the companion of the Lady Isoline, unable longer to remain silent, much marvelling at the lady's taciturnity. "There waves St. Edmund's banner. I marvel he lets it remain so long unsought."

"He seeks it not alone, girl. The Douglas is too noble to attempt its capture till the Bruce gives the signal, and permits the young nobles round him to seek it too. Ha, merciful heaven! see yon English knight who hath borne himself so valiantly; he totters on his horse, his very armour seems concealed in blood. Oh, spare him, Douglas! Who may he be?"

"Noble, lady, by his bearing, and his heading that foremost line. Wherefore doth he not wear the surcoat like his companions? we should know him then. Ah! they are parted by the rush of battle, his plume waves on the other side of the field."

"The saints be praised! I would not Douglas's hand should slay him, he bears himself so nobly. Yet, alas! how many are there like him in yon field of blood; why should I lament him more than others? Hark, a trumpet sounds! there is a movement in the king's line. Now then—oh, mother of mercy, give me strength, I will look upon them still!"

So spoke Isoline, her heart throbbing almost to suffocation, as she recognised, in the movement of her uncle, the signal for that general rush to hand-in-hand engagement which permitted space and time for the ardent aspirants to her hand to seek and win the prize.

The voice of the Bruce met her ear, but its strained sense could not distinguish the words, though her heart conceived them. Galloping from line to line, "Forward, young knights, seekers of love and glory, St. Edmund and St. Edward wait ye!" he exclaimed. "Lord of the Isles, my hope is constant in thee!" and dashing down the slope on which he stood, rushed into the thickest of the fight, followed by all his reserved troops, and for the first moment

closely surrounded by the gallant band of youthful chevaliers, whose ardent spirits had been with difficulty so long restrained ; fresh, eager, joyous, on, on they charged, seeming, in the confusion of their foes, infinitely more numerous than in reality they were, turning retreat to flight, wavering to retreat ; hundreds, nay thousands turned from that fatal field, leaving uncounted thousands struggling gloriously still.

"They retreat—they fly, bearing the banner with them. Lady, lady — Douglas, Strathallan, Fraser — on, on they rush ; they will gain it still. Now they halt ; they have gathered round it ; numbers flock to join them, double, treble file. Lady, sweet lady, thy cheek hath grown white, thy limbs tremble ; let us away."

"No, no, no !" reiterated Isoline, sinking even as she spoke upon the grass ; "it is folly—weak, cowardly folly. Mine eyes ache with the glare of sunshine on so many coats of steel, 'tis nothing more. Look forth, my girl, do not heed me ; tell me, Sir Amiot, the knight of the Blighted Branch, seest thou not him—goes he not with Douglas ? I have lost him in the crush of men and horse around the king ; yet he is there, I know he is there—he *must* be there."

"Wears he not a sable plume—rides he not a sable horse unmatched for blackness in our army ? He is yonder, look thyself, sweet lady ; alone he rides, well-nigh alone. Why, 'tis madness ; St. Edward's banner is still guarded by a host of knights, with pointed lance and barded chargers ; he cannot reach it—he is mad ; no, there are other knights on the same course."

"St. Edward's, saidst thou ? St. Edward's, 'tis St. Edmund's thou must mean ; Sir Amiot seeks St. Edmund's. Girl, thine eyes deceive thee."

"I cry thee mercy, lady, but they do not ; see, see, thyself—the Douglas is on one side of the field, Sir Amiot on the other."

"'Tis false—it must be false !" burst indignantly from the lady's lips, and, endowed with sudden return of strength, she sprung up. She looked with desperate calmness on the scene below ; all was strife—fierce, hot strife—of horse to horse, and man to man. On the brink of Bannockburn, the extreme right, a massive body of men-at-arms had made a desperate stand around the sacred banner of St.

Edmund, falling in their ranks, yet still presenting an unbroken front to the Douglas, and the rival knights, who, each seconded by their respective followers, sought with desperate courage to reach the much-desired prize. Refusing all credence to the words of her attendant, so firmly, so truthfully did she *trust*, Isoline first glanced there, but the form of the Lonely Cavalier answered not that glance. Despite the press, the rush, the turmoil, every form was distinct to that penetrating gaze; she could even at that distance recognise the various bearings of the young nobles who had so eagerly sought her hand; not one was wanting, but that one whom most she trusted to behold. Desperately, without the utterance of a single syllable, she turned, and with a shuddering anguish, turning her whole mass of blood it seemed to ice, she beheld, recognised the form of Sir Amiot, urging his horse full speed, far, far in advance of his companions, with about a score of lances and some fifty men on foot, directing his headlong way to the extreme left, where, still surrounded by its guard of men-at-arms and billmen, the banner of St. Edward waved unsullied. She saw, she felt every cherished dream was over; then came upon her soul such a dark chace of troubled fancies, which no effort of her own could dispel; the belief for one brief moment that he had played upon her feelings, had deceived her, the next she flung it from her soul, indignant with herself; he could not deceive. If she lost him for ever, she would trust him, aye, trust, till his own lips proclaimed him false. There was mystery—dark, impenetrable mystery; they had told her of the recompense attendant on the capture of St. Edward's banner, but what was that to him? then came the delivery of the prisoners, and then one dark and terrible suspicion, and then again she cast it from her.

"No, no, no!" she inwardly reiterated; "that vow, that fearful vow, hath come between him and his love. "When he bowed down his knees, avowing his long-hidden love for me, he knew not of this second meed of valour; he dreamed not the fulfilment of his vow should come between us. Amiot, Amiot, there is indeed dark mystery around thee, yet, yet, I will trust thee; lost to me as thou art, I will not believe thee false! Oh, why didst thou not speak? why leave this too proud heart so long doubting that which it

so longed for? Lost, lost, and through my own folly!—how may I bear this? God of mercy!” she burst forth aloud, “he will fall through his own rashness; he cannot pierce that wall of steel—oh, save him, save him!”

Her own voice rang shrill and mocking in her ears, for who 'mid the rude clamour reigning below might hear and answer it? The strife was becoming more and more general, more and more deadly, despite the multitude in rapid retreat. Edward of England still kept his ground, flying from post to post, from group to group, urging, impelling, conjuring them still to stand, to recall the ancient glories of his father, and make one last effort for England's honour: and struck by this unexpected spirit in their much-abused sovereign, his warriors, rallying the drooping spirits of their men, still presented a formidable front to their determined foes. The order of battle was utterly broken; but above a score of detached groups still struggled on, falling on both sides without giving in one inch of ground. Already the excellent generalship of the Bruce was evident; the pride, the flower of English chivalry lay helpless in the pits prepared to check the evolutions of the horses, falling before the pitiless swords of the lower soldiery, or surrendering themselves unresisting prisoners to their leaders. Ever and anon came a rush like thunder of flying steeds, proclaiming some new retreat, followed headlong by the victorious Scots, whose thrilling shouts of triumph angered well-nigh to madness their flying foes. The noble form of the Bruce, carrying victory, glory wherever he appeared, welcomed with rejoicing cries by his own men, who, even as they fell, felt that if their dim glance caught him they looked on triumph, and by their enemies as one bringing defeat, captivity, death. Here, there, everywhere, as possessed for the time with ubiquity, his glorious form was seen; his white plume waving high above his fellows, its spotless purity unsullied by one sanguine stain, one tinge of dust. The bravest barons of England shunned his sword, deeming it scarce shame to turn aside and refuse combat with one invulnerable as himself. Scathless the monarch of Scotland rode that field; the distant arrow bounded harmless from his faultless armour; the weapons, close at hand, turned ere they struck one blow; the lance had no power to turn his gigantic charger from his onward

way ; and thus he seemed, alike in view of friends and foes, the spirit of that mighty strife, the soul of victory, on which no mortal hand had power.

While this general struggle thus continued, neither Douglas nor Sir Amiot had relaxed their herculean efforts. Around the rival banners the battle in truth waxed hottest ; for so great, so intense was the desire to possess them, not a Scotsman fell but his place was instantly filled up with warriors as hot, as eager as had been the dead. On through the closely-pressed lines, followed by about a dozen men-at-arms, spears threatening destruction both to man and horse, swords clashing against swords, with a heat, a velocity, only slackening in death, well-nigh surrounded, wholly cut off from his friends by a thick wall of hostile steel—on, within twenty yards of St. Edward's banner, Sir Amiot still struggled, possessed in seeming of a giant's strength, a power to ward, to attack, to guard, to return blow for blow, all at one and the same moment, till his very foes gazed at him almost in awe, and had it not been for very shame, would have shunned a blade that seemed by magic charmed. On, on, yet closer, but still a double, aye, triple file of men and horse circled the banner ; they closed round the desperate knight, in front, in flank, in rear ; a dozen war-cries shouted the advance through death. The companions of Sir Amiot, believing the enterprise for them impossible, bore slightly back, and alone, amid that armed multitude, alone, amid scornful shouts of victory, of jeers on his rashness, still awoke in ringing tones the war-cry of Sir Amiot.

"On, for freedom—freedom for the prisoners of Scotland ! Amiot to the rescue—rescue to the death !" and his sword fell, carrying death with every word.

At that moment new shouts arose of triumph, of despair ; the closing ranks fell back, appalled by the sound, and still more by the apparition that sound preceded. On the brow of the hill rising behind the Scottish lines, an immense body of men, with an incongruous assemblage of flags, banners, poles, and rustic weapons, suddenly springing it seemed from the bowels of the earth, and in the act of rushing down the slope with terrible cries, and clanging drums and uncouth horns, sending such terror to the hearts of England's lordliest warriors, that all thought save of flight departed from them. The very Scotch themselves were startled,

though scarcely able to suppress a smile, when recognising in this new army the servants or gillies, women, and children, followers of the camp, sent there for safety, but who, incited by the patriotic spirit of their victorious countrymen, rushed down to the plain to share the triumph and the spoil. The English waited not to examine the origin of their suddenly-awakened panic, the divisions still compact gave way ; they sought to rally the staggering columns, to give them once more force and firmness, but in vain. On every side the trumpets sounded retreat, and fast, fast as their panting steeds might fly, the English fled that fatal scene. The lines around St. Edward's banner faltered with the rest ; those on the rear and flank of Sir Amiot fairly turned, offering such slender resistance to the Scottish knights who stood in their path, that ere he knew the cause Sir Amiot suddenly found himself gallantly reinforced ; but he was scarcely conscious of it, head, hand, foot, all employed in every movement of his foes ; in resisting every weapon raised against him ; in urging on his faithful horse, while a score of lances broke against his steel-clad sides. 'They turn—they fly ; the banner seems within his reach, one leap will gain it ; forward above a hundred yards in advance of his companions fought the Lonely Cavalier, first in pursuit ; they bear the sacred banner in their flight. Sir Amiot rushes onward, nor spur nor rein hath slackened ; he nears, so close, so fiercely, they rally once again, they closed round their precious charge, but in vain — headlong, inspired Sir Amiot penetrates the glittering phalanx, his hand is on the banner-staff ; one by one its gallant defenders fall beneath his sword ; his mother's voice is sounding in his ear, his mother's smile, and look, and form was gleaming before him ; shall he fail now ?—no, no : appalled, his enemies shrunk back from his reeking sword, one struggle to retrieve their loss, and they turn, they fly. A wild exulting shout burst from Sir Amiot's men, but his lips breathed no word, though his task is done ; high, high in the air he waves the sacred banner—his own, unanswerably his own—and round him the young knights throng, nobly striving who first amidst his eager rivals shall proclaim him victor.

"Not now, not now !" he shouted, almost breathless, "not yet may I pause ; enough, ye own me victor.

Fitz-Alan, bear thou this glorious charge till I may claim it ; ask me no question, give me but way—I have more, yet more to do."

Sir Walter Fitz-Alan joyfully caught the banner, checking with an effort the question on his lips. There was an irresistible eloquence in the tone of his impassioned voice, in the beaming flash of his large dark eye, carrying his own hope and daring energy to the hearts of his companions ; they opened a passage for him. He darted on, foam and blood well-nigh concealing alike the armour and the colour of his steed. One glance he gave towards the crag, that form was there, still there ; an impulse he could not resist caused him, even at such a moment, to lift his helmet from his brow, to wave it in the air. Did his eyes deceive him, or could it be even then, then—when the heart of any ordinary woman must have doubted, scorned him—he saw an answering sign, a blue scarf as a pennon floated on the breeze ? Fancy or reality, the effect was such as to make him dash the helmet to the earth, instead of replacing it on his head, wholly unconscious, in the reviving hope of that one moment, that he had done so, to clasp his hands together in a speechless ecstasy of joy, to snatch the reins, plunge his spurs once more into the sides of his gallant steed, and dash on his headlong way. He saw the banner of St. Edmund yet waved amidst its gallant guard, about a mile from the scene of action, as if the fugitives had there made their determined stand, resolved to perish ere they yielded ; still his eye traced the towering form of Douglas, foremost against his foes, dealing, as himself had done but a few minutes previous, destruction with every blow ; so rapid were his evolutions both of steed and sword, the eye ached with the effort to define them. On, on darted Sir Amiot, dashing down every opposing sword, every obstacle that crossed his headlong way ; on, on over unnumbered slain, over chargers rolling in the death agony on the grass, over pools whose gory waves gave fearful evidence of the strife that had been there ; on, through the brook of Bannock, turning with shuddering horror even at such a moment from making a bridge of the hundreds and hundreds of slain which encumbered the stream, so as completely to fill up its waters ; staggering, failing, almost exhausted, still the noble animal he rode, as if conscious of the precious prize

he sought, bore him gallantly up the steep bank, on with renewed swiftness in the direction of the banner; he neared the scene of strife, not a quarter of a mile divided him. Still the banner waved in the air, still the Douglas, chafed by this long struggle, almost beyond his usual moderation, struggled fiercely, terribly to penetrate those ranks, leaving every other competitor far in the rear; some of them must have fallen, for Sir Amiot traced but two beside him, and nerved with double hope, with an energy that appeared bright promise of success, wholly insensible of fatigue, of loss of blood, of all save that Isoline might yet be his own, the knight rushed on; his horse staggered, relaxed, made one desperate forward leap, and fell. Another minute and Sir Amiot regained his footing, though with a dizzy brain and quivering frame; still he struggled to spring forward, he stood within a hundred yards of the desired post. A loud shout rent the air, the last man beside the banner lay dead beneath the hoofs of the Douglas's steed, the hands of Douglas had wrenched it from the earth where it was planted, had held it aloft, while shout after shout proclaimed his victory. The earth reeled beneath Sir Amiot's feet; sight, hearing, sense seemed flying. He looked up to that same crag, the form he sought was gone, or his eyes refused to recognise it; there was a dead weight on heart and brain, a cessation of every pulse, a failing of every limb, and the young warrior sunk to all appearance lifeless on the earth.

While these momentous events were taking place in different parts of the plain, Sir Giles de Argentine had succeeded in forcing his sovereign from the fatal field. Fiercely Edward had contended, exposing himself a hundred times to death, imprisonment, danger of every kind, flying from post to post, seeking by every possible effort of high personal valour to turn the tide of battle.

"Away, away!" he cried, as Sir Giles seized the reins of his horse, and urged him forward, "where are De Vessay, Montford, De Clifford, Mareschal? Have I not seen them fall?—is not their blood around me? Leave me, De Argentine; my people hate me, they will hate me more for this, though God wot, all that man might do to avert this evil I have done. Leave me to lie with those more valued than myself."

"My liege, it shall not be," firmly replied the crusader. "Do not speak thus, it ill befits thee as England's king or Edward's son. A monarch's life is not his own; wert thou other than thou art, De Argentine were the last to compel or counsel flight, but as it is, thou shalt live, my liege, to make thy people love thee."

"They will not, they will not," resumed the unfortunate monarch; "and wherefore wouldst thou lead me? Leave me; seek my sister, bear her in safety. Gloucester, my noble Gloucester, where is he?"

"Away, away!" answered the knight; "they press upon us close. My Lord of Pembroke, bring round your men, see to the king."

De Valence heard the words, and with a skilful manœuvre completely encircled the person of the king, and on they fled, keeping close and firm, till the press of the battle was left far behind.

"Now then, farewell, my liege," exclaimed the crusader, as for one brief minute he threw himself off his steed, knelt at Edward's stirrup, raised his hand to his lips, and then sprung anew into his saddle. "I leave thee in safety; it is *thy* duty to retreat, it is mine to *die*. Never did an Argentine fly. Farewell." He set his spurs to his charger, and ere Edward could utter one word in reply he was out of sight.

Again the terrible war-cry, "Argentine, Argentine!" resounded on the battle-plain, followed by the figure of the undaunted warrior, charging full speed, the thickest of the Scottish ranks, forward, still forward, though utterly alone. "Yield, yield thyself honourable prisoner," burst from hundreds of voices, but he heeded or heard not the appeal; they would have saved him, they sought to elude his desperate purpose, but De Argentine resolved on death, flung himself into the hottest of the strife, and found it; he fell covered with glory as with wounds.

Evening at length fell upon the victors, the pursuers, and the flying; the sounds of war, the cries of the dying, the shouts of the victor, had sunk into silence on the battle-plain. Troop after troop of the victorious Scots had returned, bringing with them prisoners of the first rank and consequence. The slain lay in immense heaps over the field, covering the country for miles; hundreds and hundreds of splendidly-caparisoned chargers lay side by side

with their noble masters ; others were galloping, riderless, over the field, trembling with terror, shrieking fierce with pain. But when the summer moon rode high in the starlit heavens the scene was changed. Surrounded by his nobles, knights, and soldiers, bareheaded, and lowly bending to the blood-stained earth, the King of Scotland knelt, to join in the fervent thanksgiving offered up by the Abbot of Inchaffray to that Almighty God of battles, from whom alone king and noble, knight and serf, acknowledged with heart-felt humility that glorious triumph came. Not a sound broke the solemn stillness, save the fervid accents of the venerable man, the deep responses from the thousands kneeling round. There, in sight of the dead, the dying, the silvery moon gleaming back from the armour they had had no time to doff, the weapons they had wielded so bravely and well, cast from the hands now crossed upon their breasts in prayer, the unhelmeted heads low bent—there was that victorious army, there the bold hearts, conscious of but one almighty thrilling emotion, urging to a burst of thanksgiving equal in intensity to its exciting cause ; their souls sprung up rejoicing. The last link of slavery was broken, they were free ! Scotland was free !

A brief while they knelt in devotion, and then again all was joyous bustle and military life. Officers and soldiers alike crowded round their sovereign, to every one of whom he had a word alike of greeting and of thanks, eagerly scanning the features of each, as fearing even in that moment of triumph to find some loved and valued one amidst the slain, but even this alloy was spared him ; his loss had been so small, that but two knights of any consideration, Sir William Vipont and Sir Walter Ross, were amongst the slain ; several nobles indeed were seriously wounded, and amongst them some of the brave competitors for the hand of Isoline, whose energy and desperate valour had led them into danger.

“Douglas—where is Douglas ?” asked the king, impatiently. and a dozen voices answered he was still on the pursuit, bearing St. Edmund’s banner as his prize.

“He was the victor, then. Now, every saint in heaven be praised !” ejaculated Robert. “Douglas, my noble Douglas, there needed but this to render this day’s triumph complete ; and St. Edward’s, whose valiant arm planteth

St. Andrew's banner on Stirling's loftiest tower—whose glorious task gives liberty to her captives?"

"Sir Amiot of the Branch!" was the unanimous reply.

"Ha! my noble Amiot; 'tis as we suspected. Where is the gallant knight—why claims he not his own?"

"He will to-morrow, good my liege," the light form of Malcolm the page pushed through the lordly crowd to answer the question. "He is faint from loss of blood, though praised be the saints, not fatally wounded. He commends himself to your highness, and trusts by to-morrow's dawn to demand his recompense."

"'Tis his ere asked," replied the king. "Say we greet him lovingly and rejoicingly, and grieve he is not by our side. We will visit him ourself ere we seek repose. Ha! Fitz-Alan, methought it was from thy hand St. Edward's banner waved, and looked to greet thee victor."

"Nay, I was but the bearer for Sir Amiot, good my liege," replied the young knight, modestly. "I might not hope to outvie him in the pursuit of this precious charge."

"But thou wert close behind him, Walter," answered the king, laughing. "Thou art a good knight and true, and hast nobly won thy spurs."

The young warrior bowed low, with cheeks glowing with unfeigned pleasure.

"Had not his horse failed him, the Douglas had had a powerful rival even for St. Edmund's in this same Sir Amiot," observed another of the group. "By my knightly faith, I never saw such mighty strength and prowess."

"St. Edmund's!—sought he St. Edmund's? ha!" exclaimed King Robert; but what further he might have said was interrupted by the hasty entrance of his brother, followed by about ten men-at-arms, in the centre of whom stood an English prisoner.

"In this prisoner," said Edward Bruce, fiercely, "I bring your highness an attainted traitor, one deserving death—Alan of Buchan."

An exclamation of surprise, triumph, and execration, all strangely blended, ran through the crowd, save from the king himself.

"That, Alan of Buchan!" he said; "thou art mistaken, good brother. We could swear that were not the Alan we

have known, by this first glance, even before we see his face. Why, when Alan disappeared, he would make two such men as he. Unhelm him; ye surely cannot all have forgotten the noble son of Isabella."

He was instantly obeyed, and on the removal of the helmet, a movement to which the prisoner made not the least resistance, a face was discovered as wholly unlike the bold, frank, noble countenance of the young heir of Buchan, which even nearly eight years had failed entirely to erase from the recollection of his countrymen, that Edward Bruce himself started back astonished. There was the raven hair, the dark eye, in very truth, features which had been so often brought forward by rumour in confirmation of his identity, but the expression of which they formed a part was as unlike that of Alan as night from day. His was all expression, this was an utter blank; not devoid perhaps of regularity of feature, but wholly of that sparkling intellect, the enthusiastic spirit, which had so characterised Sir Alan, who resembled his mother to an almost extraordinary degree; and if there were any likeness in the face of the prisoner, it was to the Earl of Buchan, save that that which in the earl was harsh and dark, in him was softened into a blank; his figure, too, though apparently well proportioned, was peculiarly slight and effeminate, whereas Alan's had been vigorous, and tall as a sapling pine. The young man made no attempt at concealment, nor did he seem to shun the stern looks he encountered.

"Who and what art thou?" at length demanded the king, somewhat sternly; "by what right bearest thou a name and cognizance we know art not thine own? Speak, and truly, as thou hopest for life, or by our crown, thou shalt rue thy falsehood."

"My name is Alan, and a father's justice made me Alan of Buchan," replied the young man, more firmly and boldly than was expected. "It was enough for me to do as he bade me, without inquiring wherefore. The king and peers of England received me as my father's son, a mother's dying lips had given me that father's name; he claimed and treated me in all things as his son; my duty then was to obey him."

"So far thou hast spoken well," replied the Bruce, less sternly; "but was it thy duty, by falsehood, to cast foul

shame upon a noble name, and poison Scottish ears by the black tale that Alan of Buchan repented of his former oaths of fealty to ourself, and would atone for them by fidelity to Edward, and by ceaseless vengeance on the Bruce?"

"My lips were guiltless of such falsehood, gracious sovereign," and a deep blush stained the young man's cheek. "True, I asserted what my father bade me; but such as this I never breathed. Perchance 'twas equal guilt by silence to affirm that which he so frequently proclaimed; but the favour of my sovereign, the intoxicating pleasures of a court, drowned the voice of conscience."

"And of him whom thou hast personated," said the king, with earnestness, "knowest thou aught of him? an thou tellest us Sir Alan lives, that we may find or rescue him, instant freedom shall be thy reward."

"Alas! I fear, my liege, it was his death which opened his father's heart to me. I have thought, by the dark, horrible accents of remorse breathed in slumber by the Earl of Buchan, that death came not naturally, and I have shuddered when I knew that I was occupying the place of one fearfully and secretly removed. I believed my father dead, when three months since a packet was brought to me by one who had received it direct from the earl in Norway, sealed by his own signet and signed by his own hand. It bade me seek the King of Scotland, and place in his hands a paper enclosed. Preparations were then making for the relief of Stirling; I could not quit King Edward's side without dishonour, and therefore determined on surrendering myself prisoner, if I could not otherwise obtain the audience I desired: and now that my task is done," he knelt and presented a sealed packet, which he had drawn from his vest, "your grace may do with me what you list."

"Ha! is it so?" exclaimed the Bruce, hastily breaking the large seal and thick silk with which the packet was secured, disregarding every entreaty of his followers to beware lest the scrawl were poisoned. "There is truth in every word the youth speaks. Buchan, treacherous as he is, would not make him so base a tool. No! his better nature is fairly roused. Ha! what is this?" he glanced his eye rapidly down the page, then read aloud—"To Robert

the Bruce, erewhiles Earl of Carrick and Baron of Annandale, now king of the whole Scottish realm, these :—Whereas I have hitherto declared and proclaimed Alan of Buchan, son of the Countess Isabella, a rebel and a traitor to Scotland, and true and faithful liegeman to King Edward ; one under a solemn pledge to carry on his father's vow of extermination against the Bruce. I hereby do utterly and solemnly deny the same, declaring, by the sacred name of God and the whole army of saints and martyrs, that I have done him foul wrong, and that he who bears the name of Alan of Buchan is not the child of Isabella of Fife, but one born in unlawful wedlock, and but brought from obscurity to assist a foul and wicked scheme of vengeance against both Isabella and her child. I here, from a bed in all human seeming of death, do acknowledge sincere repentance of the same, and publicly avow I have foully injured both my wife and son ; holding the one pure and spotless, alike in thought and deed, and for the other, Robert the Bruce, if ever he seek thee, let not the aspersions cast upon his name come between him and thy favour ; he is as true to thee and Scotland as his father has been rebellious against both.—Signed, John Comyn of Buchan, at the Monastery of St. Bernard, in the Vale of Christiana, Norway ;” and further attested by the abbot and other superiors of the convent, whose names were written in full.

“What think you of this, my lords?” exclaimed the Bruce, joyously, as exultingly he threw the packet in the midst of them. “Alan, my noble Alan, the day that gives thee and thy mother back to Robert's court will be a joy to Scotland, and shall give thee liberty,” he continued, addressing the prisoner.

“But Sir Alan — where is Sir Alan ?” repeated many eager voices ; “the scrawl speaks of him as in life, but says not where. An he be still in prison, methinks Buchan's recantation is somewhat unsatisfactory ; the wily traitor knows he is safe in making this avowal : his son cannot seek your grace's favour.”

“Think you so, my good lords ?” and there was a peculiarly arch expression in the Bruce's smile. “Well, well ; time may unravel this even as so many other marvellous events. Who would have dreamed ten years ago, the hunted, persecuted exile, without a bed whereon to rest his

weary limbs, a roof to guard him from the pitiless storm, should ride triumphant o'er a field like this, compel e'en England's king to fly, her bravest nobles lying at his feet? think of these things, and marvel at nought which may befall. Ha! a horn—my Douglas. Quick, quick! bring him hither; let the prisoner be removed to all honourable keeping."

The entrance of the Douglas prevented further notice of Buchan's important missive just at that time. The king received him with unfeigned delight, rejoicing yet more in the brilliant success which gave him a yet nearer title to his affection than even the extraordinary skill and courage he had displayed. The young nobleman gave an animated account of his pursuit of the king, who several times had escaped capture almost by a miracle; he had followed him as far as Dunbar, whose governor, the Earl of March, had given him refuge.

"'Tis well; we have gained glory enough, my Douglas," was the king's reply. "We fought alone for peace and freedom, and these obtained, we shall not rest the harder for Edward's liberty. But the young Earl of Gloucester, hast thou seen him? his fate we cannot learn; heaven grant it be life and freedom!"

Various suggestions answered this observation, but already we have lingered too long in the royal pavilion, and must hasten to other actors in our drama, whose fate depends upon its close.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

THE day following the battle dawned on a busy and varied scene; the soldiers were busy in clearing the field of the dead, in the melancholy task of military burial, rendered perhaps less painful in its details by the grateful perception how few had fallen on their side, compared to their foes. The search for the young Earl of Gloucester was at length successful, and with bitter sorrow King Robert desired the body to be conveyed in all honour to the Convent of St. Ninian, there to lie in state till his funeral could be conducted with the ceremonies due to his

rank, and that vivid remembrance of his noble father which the Bruce still so fondly entertained; messengers were also despatched to the Convent of St. Mary, headed by the Earl of Lennox, to whose tender sympathy the king intrusted the painful task of informing the Princess Joan of the fate of her son, and implore her to return with him to superintend the last melancholy duties to the noble dead. The Convent of St. Ninian offered her a safe and honourable retreat till this was done, and then she was at perfect liberty to return to England, or remain in Scotland, as the Bruce's most loved and honoured friend. This duty of chivalry accomplished, the king was at liberty to receive the surrender of the castle of Stirling from the hands of Sir Philip de Mowbray, who, unarmed and bare-headed, bearing the keys in his hand, and followed by his principal knights and officers, was marshalled into the king's pavilion, and in the presence of all Scotland's nobles and their knightly prisoners, on his knee, laid the keys at the Bruce's feet, surrendered himself and all the English within the castle lawful prisoners, and acknowledged him at once conqueror and Scotland's legal sovereign.

"Sir Amiot of the Branch, we commit these precious keys to thy charge, and hail thee seneschal of Stirling, and liberator of its prisoners, an honour fairly and nobly won, alike by thy foresight and valour made thine own," was the king's frank address, as he placed the keys with his own royal hand into that of his young follower, who clothed with more than usual richness, though he still wore his mask, was standing by his side, seemingly so calm and full of thought as usual, that Edward Bruce had tormented him with raillery on his insensibility, declaring he did not deserve to receive his prize. "Earnestly, we trust," the king continued, "that this reward may give thee yet something more than honour, and thou mayest find amid those prisoners thy prudent words made ours, *that* one on whom so much depends. A brief hour hence we take possession, and trust to find an *unmasked* seneschal will give us welcome." Sir Amiot bent his lips to his sovereign's outstretched hand, and fixed his large dark eyes upon him in eloquent reply. "Young knights, who so gallantly struggled for this reward, and whose failure gives ye no shadow of shame, attend Sir Amiot; we wait but to see the banner of

Scotland float from the tower, and will instantly march onward."

A joyful shout burst from the youthful knights as on they went, the broad standard of Scotland in the midst of them, and pennons and penconelles glittering from the spear-heads in varied array, the torn and sullied banner of St. Edward waved exultingly by Fitz-Alan. On they went, the silver clarion and deeper trumpet pouring forth glad sounds of triumph. The drawbridge was thrown down, portcullis up and oaken doors flung back, and Stirling was in very truth their own. Scottish prisoners of every rank and every grade were assembled in the courts, and pressed round them, many of them with sobs and tears calling them their liberators, their friends, and beseeching blessings on the Bruce's head. The warriors flung themselves from their horses, recognising many as long-lost companions in arms, friends they had deemed were slain. Sir Amiot alone stood aloof, unknowing and unknown; he could not bear to abridge that scene, and ere a free passage was obtained to permit his ascent to the banner turret, the time for the king's arrival was rapidly approaching. A ringing shout from every man below, caught up and repeated by every soldier on the plain of Bannock, and echoed and re-echoed again and yet again, proclaimed the raising of the standard, the standard of Scotland's freedom, the sovereignty of Bruce. Gallantly stood forth Sir Amiot's stately form, as uprooting the flag of England, he held it aloft one moment in the sight of all, then flung it from the tower to the court below, while the flourish of a hundred trumpets swelled forth his triumph. A troop of magnificently-attired knights, on splendid chargers, were instantly visible, leaving the field in front of the castle, and Sir Amiot hastened from the turret in search of the prisoners of rank, none of whom had as yet been visible. He knew not of the name or rank of any save of one, and now that the vow of years was fulfilled, the goal obtained, his heart shrunk forebodingly within itself, as if it were impossible, wholly impossible he should indeed gaze upon that face and list that voice again. How might he prepare her for that meeting—would she know him—believe his identity? oh, the agonizing doubts and fears of that moment, which one effort of volition might dispel, and yet for which he had no power.

Had the loss of blood of the preceding day so utterly prostrated him, to make him tremble thus? where was his manhood? He struggled with himself; he paced the gallery to conquer emotion ere he entered that hall of audience where the prisoners waited their liberators; at that moment Walter Fitz-Alan bounded towards him, full of excitement.

"Amiot, Amiot, there is the loveliest vision in this castle I ever set eyes upon, thou hast never seen the like. She came upon me like a spirit, so full of grace and life, and with a face—the sun has never looked on such another! Who is she—what is she?—an she be *thy* unknown love, Amiot, I will go hang myself in despair."

"No need of that, my fiery Walter; why thou art all but deranged already. What is there so marvellous in a beautiful face? I seek not her; but tell me, tell me, Walter, art thou lovest me, the—the Countess of Buchan—hast seen her? Is she here—is she well?" he laid his trembling hand on the young man's arm, and spoke in such a tone of emotion, Fitz-Alan was for the moment completely sobered, even to the exclusion of surprise.

"The Countess of Buchan—is she the object of thy vow? who could have believed it? I have seen her; she is well, noble, glorious as eight years ago, save—nay, but Amiot, good friend, bear up, see her thyself, and set all doubts at rest. Thou surely art more badly wounded than we dreamed of."

"No, no, I am weakened in mind, not body, Walter; it was not thus I thought to meet her. Come, we will go together."

He put his arm within Fitz-Alan's, and, struggling for calmness, entered the audience hall. There were three or four female figures at the further end, and one of them instantly came forward.

"Another of our gallant deliverers! he is indeed most welcome," was her greeting, in tones that brought Sir Amiot instantly on his knee, and he doffed his cap and bowed his head, without once looking on her face, for he felt if he had he must have given way. "Methinks, young sir, in the Convent of Our Lady of Mount Carmel we met before; thy valour rescued us from outrage."

"And truly, lady, by him is gained thy present freedom,"

interposed Walter Fitz-Alan, eagerly; "for his foresight made the ransomless liberation of the prisoners one of the conditions of Sir Philip de Mowbray's journey to London in behalf of Stirling. King Robert hails him seneschal of Stirling, deliverer of its prisoners; I pray thee look upon him thus."

"And who is this valiant knight—hath he no name? I pray thee, gallant sir, say unto whom Isabella of Buchan is indebted for this blessed day; who gives her back to Scotland and to freedom?"

"One who five years hath sought it," lady, replied the young knight, raising his head, and gazing on her expressive face, while his voice strangely and painfully quivered; "one, whose duty it had been to do so, had there been no deep love, no glory in the deed. Lady, is there none, thinkest thou, to whom thy liberty, thy joy, could be the first grand object of a life—none to whom for thy freedom e'en death were welcome? Oh, speak."

"There was but one," replied the countess, fearfully agitated; "but one whose love for Isabella could lead him on to this—but one, and he—oh, wherefore shouldst thou speak this? I have no son."

"Might it not be that the tale they told was false; that Alan lives, though nameless—hidden even from his friends, till his mother's worth might be reflected upon him, and vouch his truth. Oh, do not sink now; mother, my noble mother, live, live, to look upon, to bless thy child!"

Paler and paler, till her very lips became white as marble, the countenance of the countess had become, while her hand convulsively grasped his shoulder, and her whole frame shook as an aspen; the knight had dashed his mask and plumed cap aside, had flung his arms convulsively around her knees, and with one long look of irrepressible love upon her face, had buried his head in the folds of her robe, and that long pent-up emotion broke forth in choking sobs.

"Alan, Alan! have I a son—did he say Alan lives? God of mercy, let this be no dream! Look up, look up, once again—'twas thus I saw him last: oh, what have been these long years of misery? My child, my child, speak, tell me I am not mad! No, no, that face, that glorious face—thou art mine own! Oh, God of mercy, thou hast given me back my child!"

She had lifted his head as she spoke, she had put back the long clustering hair, gazing on those beautiful features, with a look of such fearful wildness, such intense inquiry, Fitz-Alan trembled for her reason. Her voice had become more and more the accent of delirium, until, as with an almost prostrating effort, she conquered it, and seemed compelling herself to calmness; and then, as Alan, in answer to her agonized appeal, "Speak, tell me I am not mad," repeated that single word "Mother," checking his own emotion to support her, the tightly-drawn brain gave way, and with a burst of passionate tears she sunk upon his bosom, folding her arms around him, murmuring his name, conscious only she gazed upon her son.

Time passed, how much neither of those long-separated ones might know. There had been a trumpet sounded without, a burst of shouting triumph, of royal acclaim, a tramp of many feet, alike in the courtyards and the castle hall. They had been left comparatively alone, for Fitz-Alan had obeyed that trumpet sound, and the other inmates of the chamber had kept far aloof, feeling the emotions of that mother and son were far too sacred to be looked upon; but *they* knew nothing of all these things; they felt nothing but that they were clasped to each other's hearts, that tears were mingling; that there was such deep joy dawning for Isabella, her brain might scarce bear the change, quivering and trembling beneath it, as the eye, long accustomed to the darkness, shrinks back almost in pain from the dazzling flash of light by which it is dispelled. Alan felt not this; he only knew he could lay his aching head upon her breast and feel that there was on earth one who loved him, one that he might love, whose tenderness might quench the burning agony that raged within. A well-known voice aroused them, a kindly arm unclasped the trembling yet convulsive hold of Alan from his mother's drooping form, and gently bade her wake to joy and freedom.

"No, no, we will not homage, lady; thou hast enough to feel, to see. The Bruce needs not the knee of Isabella to proclaim him sovereign," exclaimed Robert, kindly; and startled into consciousness by his voice, both the countess and her son found themselves surrounded by the sovereign and his knights; the former would have knelt, but was effectually prevented.

"We would rather beseech thee to forget all concerning us, save that we are a faithful friend, to whom the thought of the misery thy loyalty to us hath called down on thee, hath ever been a thought of pain, which we would long ere this have banished, had heaven permitted us by the sword's point to gain thy freedom. We dreamed not till this morning this blessing awaited us, that midst the prisoners of Stirling was the Countess of Buchan, or perchance we had scarce waited so patiently for Edward's coming."

"There is dearer blessing in store for thee, my gracious liege," returned the countess, restored by a strong effort to her usual self-possession, and even at that moment forgetting all personal feeling to pour into the Bruce's heart a portion of her own deep joy. "Look yonder, my sovereign, seest thou not one whose freedom and whose presence are dearer, more precious yet?"

The crowd had unconsciously divided to permit the entrance amongst them of that same lovely girl whose beauty had so bewildered Fitz-Alan, and who now stood amongst those warrior-forms, three or four yards from the king, gazing upon him with an expression of such reverence, admiration, love, that every eye turned for the moment from Alan of Buchan to rest on her. The Bruce looked towards her, started, stood doubtful, but, ere the doubt was solved, the fair girl had bounded forward, murmuring, "Father, hast forgotten thy little Marjory?" and the sovereign had folded his daughter to his warrior-heart.

With arms folded on his bosom, a countenance deadly pale, a mien yet more loftily erect, Alan of Buchan stood by his mother's side, almost concealed by drooping tapestry, as his fellow-knights and nobles thronged round the countess to pay her the respectful homage her sufferings in the Bruce's cause so well deserved. He could not come forward; even at that moment the remembrance of the detestation in which his whole line was so naturally regarded by the faithful followers of the Bruce was on his heart, bowing it to the dust; he had fought, had bled for his king, had saved his life, but what mattered these things? he was a Comyn still, and not till the sovereign's own voice was heard in eager inquiry, "Alan, where is my noble Alan—why does he shun me?" had he courage to bound forward, and prostrate himself at Robert's feet.

"Here at thy feet, my liege. Oh, take not the love thou didst vouchsafe to the nameless Amiot from him who bears a traitor's name. Let me but feel I have still a claim upon my sovereign's love, that the years of faithful service, as an unknown, nameless adventurer, have not been all in vain. The dark mystery around me is solved; for my mother's sake, accept my homage still."

"Nay, ask that of the prejudiced, tyrannical fool of England, not of the noble Robert, who ever loved thee, Alan, e'en when the whole world believed thee traitor," exclaimed the impetuous Edward, rushing to the kneeling knight ere the king could reply, raising and embracing him. "I have done thee foul wrong, wounded thy too sensitive heart again and again; but who could suppose the solitary Amiot, *sans nom, sans parens*, concealed a being once so lamented, and then so misdoubted, as Alan of Buchan? Who could dream it was a mother's freedom thou didst so nobly, so devotedly seek? though, by my faith, now the mystery's solved, we were all sorry fools, I take it, not to solve it before. Well, well, the past is the past, and all that Edward Bruce may do is to acknowledge and deplore his injury, and crave thy pardon."

"And I, and I, and I," repeated several voices; and one by one the nobles of Scotland pressed eagerly forward to clasp the young knight's hand, to beseech his friendship, to assure him name, ancestry, all were forgotten, all, save that he was the son of Isabella, the noble patriot, the gallant knight, the devoted follower of the Bruce.

Affected beyond all power of speech, there was such a varying of colour on Alan's cheek, that both the Bruce and his mother felt alarmed, suspecting the immense exertions of the previous day, or some secret cause, had undermined that health more than was outwardly visible.

"And what may thy sovereign add, my Alan?" he said, when the noisy congratulations of Sir Alan's younger companions permitted him to speak; "what, save that we will find some nobler name for thee than that thou bearest now; a name unstained as thine own honour, thy noble mother's fame. Thy mystery was solved yestere'en to us," he added, with a smile, "though the wits of our good brother and gallant knights were somewhat more obtuse. Thou lookest wondrous puzzled, gentle sir, and perchance will be

yet more so. See here, a father's hand hath done thee justice, tardy though it be."

Alan glanced over the paper the king presented. His cheek flushed, his eye glistened; he saw nothing regarding himself, only one sentence printed itself on his heart, and flinging his arms around his mother, he murmured forth, "Mother, my own mother! even by him thy worth acknowledged, thy spotless name proclaimed. Oh, were this blessed moment my last, thine Alan hath not lived in vain."

We may not linger further on this scene, important though it be. Much there was to be explained, much which not alone the Countess Isabella yearned to hear, but for which the king and his nobles all loudly called; how he had escaped from imprisonment, death, the origin of his vow, why he had kept it so rigidly, and numerous other questions, relative to Alan, were asked and answered; and then there was much for Robert to hear from his own sweet girl, from whose beloved form his arm had never moved even when addressing and listening to Alan, and on whose lovely, innocent face his eye ever turned and turned again, as the eye of the weary and the thirsty traveller of the desert is fascinated to the distant fount, however other objects may pleasantly intervene and seek to turn it thence. He had to learn, and gladly she told him, that Lady Mowbray, under whose charge she and her mother had been some time in England, had so dearly loved her company, that on Sir Philip's sending for her to Stirling, where he was governor, she had prevailed on the king to permit the princess accompanying her, and the queen, after a severe struggle, had consented to part with her child, to deprive her tedious imprisonment of its only comfort, hoping that some fortunate chance might restore her Marjory to the king, her father, sooner than could be if she remained in England.

"My noble, unselfish Margaret, and thy tender wish is fulfilled," responded the king, straining the princess again and again to his bosom; "and thou shalt speedily rejoin us. Not alone a kingdom have I regained, but treasures dearer yet—my wife and child."

While these momentous events were taking place in Stirling Castle, the Convent of St. Ninian had been the scene of feelings perhaps equally intense. Recorted by the Earl

of Lennox and James of Douglas—whose ardent longings for an interview with his well and honourably-won Isoline had been painfully damped, by the assurance of the abbess that she was really too much indisposed to see him so early in the morning as he had entreated—the Princess Joan, Countess of Gloucester, had arrived, and been received with all the deference her rank demanded, all the true heartfelt sympathy her loss had claimed. A brief while she had passed alone beside the body of her child; her agonized forebodings all were realized, and that she had foreboded this could not assuage its pang. The first anguish of that mother's heart no eye had witnessed, and when she left that room of death, the touching dignity of silent, lasting grief alone was visible. She sate with the abbess, sometimes silent, sometimes speaking of the lost, when lightly and suddenly, as usual, Agnes stood before them.

"They have won, they have won!" she said, putting her arms caressingly about the abbess's neck. "Said I not Scotland would be free—Robert should be glorious? Oh, he will need Agnes and her own faithful lover no more, and so he hath gone up, up, where I may not see him, but I know I shall go to him soon, he hath whispered it in his own sweet voice. Ha! who is that?" she interrupted herself, and her eye fixed itself on the face of the Princess Joan with such intensity, the orb seemed almost glazed. She passed her hand over her brow, as if there was a pressure of pain, and every feature gradually contracted, as if under some powerful effort of mind. "Who is that? I should know the face if I had memory. Why does it conjure up such horrible fancies, that strange, awful dream, which sometimes is so clear I believe it must be reality? yet how can it be, when he was never on earth? They never could do to him the horrible things I saw. Lady, sweet lady, in mercy tell me who thou art!"

"Alas! poor sufferer, I fear me thou hast all too vivid a remembrance," replied the princess, at once recollecting Agnes, and divining her affliction and its cause. "Do not look upon me thus, my child; ask not a name that must bring with it but memories of sorrow. Look on me only as a friend who loved thee, dearest."

"Loved me! Where didst thou know me? Memories—I have no memory. But tell me, oh, tell me, who thou art.

The cloud is gathering darker ; Nigel, Nigel, let it not descend. Who art thou ?”

Terrified at the increasing wildness of look and tone, though trembling at the effect the sound of her name might produce, the princess tenderly replied—

“My name is Joan, sweet girl, the Dame of Gloucester.”

“Gloucester, the Dame of Gloucester!—what hath that name to do with me ? Why should it bring such agony ? What are these forms that throng upon me ? they press, they hem me round. Oh, give me way, let me go to him—it is my husband !” and with a wild shriek of horror, the unhappy girl dropped senseless on the ground.

It was long ere they could restore her to life, to consciousness of outward things ; and longer still ere she had strength to raise herself from the couch where they had laid her, to raise her hand to her aching brow, to stand erect ; but the placid smile of infancy returned, and she was calm, gentle, caressing as her wont, without one trace of the fearful paroxysm that had thus prostrated her, save the fast decay of frame.

The Lady Isoline sate alone within her chamber, her elbow rested on a table near, one hand supporting her head, while the other hung by her side, her whole position presenting in its repose that utter abandonment of expression which we sometimes see in a marble statue, and which, without the aid of either sound or colouring, fills the heart and eye with silent sympathising-tears.

The Lord of Douglas had just left her, so full of his own happiness, his own deep love, that he could not be conscious of alloy. He knew, had long known his love was not returned with the warmth he gave, and therefore that his rapturous expressions of affection, gratitude, devotion met with but gentle, quiet, dignified replies, had no power to quench that joy ; he looked to a life to gain him the love he longed for, to deeds of such unobtruding worship, which his knowledge of her character inspired, at length to obtain him somewhat more than esteem, and till then his own love, the consciousness she was his own, was all-sufficient for the completion of individual joy. Not a dream, a thought that her heart was preoccupied had ever entered his soul ; and, despite all her resolutions, all her wishes, she could not in that interview tell him. She

thought to have seen the supposed Sir Amiot ere she and Douglas met, to have that strange mystery all dissolved, his name and rank acknowledged, and in them to find some sufficient cause for this avowal ; for still, aye, though hour after hour passed and he came not, made no effort to seek her, still she *trusted*, would not believe him false, though eye and ear and memory and reason's self all rose up to crush that trust, to tell her loudly she clasped a shadow. How passed that dreaded interview with Douglas, what she had said she scarcely knew, save that she had made no profession of love, had given him no word to lead him to believe she felt for him more than she had ever said, and there was some faint comfort in that thought. But now that he had left her, the utter prostration of mental strength was again upon her, bowing her heart with a load of suffering as impossible to be defined as to be conquered. What did she seek ? what good to see Sir Amiot again, to hear his lips solve the mystery around him ? how would that avail her and give her back to joy ? She might have asked herself these questions and many more, but answers came there none ; and it was something peculiarly touching to see the highborn maiden, whose heart had ever seemed too proud and yet too light, too full of effervescence to retain the shade of sorrow, drooping thus ? her very attitude denoting utter, utter hopelessness. How long she remained in this position, how long it was since Douglas had left her, she was wholly unconscious, as also that an attendant had entered, asked some question, and been answered by an assenting sign. A deep sigh aroused her, a sigh so responsive to her own thought at that moment it sounded, that it fairly startled her into hastily raising her eyes, and looking inquiringly around her. About a yard from the door of her apartment, over which the tapestry had again closely fallen, as if either bodily or mental powers had failed to the utter prevention of his farther advance, stood a tall, martial figure, whose rich and graceful attire could not conceal that the limbs were painfully enfeebled ; his head was uncovered, his fair face, pale as death, but beautiful even in its suffering, fully exposed to view ; his raven hair pushed from his marble brow, and falling in long curls on either side, rendering perhaps that ashy paleness more painfully striking. Isoline cast one doubting

glance; could she be mistaken in that form, those eyes; though the face was more beautiful than her wildest dreams had pictured. But if it were him, why did he not approach her—why stand thus, distant, reserved, as had been so long his wont? Forgetting her situation, her engagement, her dignity, everything but that him she loved was before her, Isoline sprung towards him.

"Amiot, Amiot, thou art come at length!" she wildly cried. "Oh, why not before?"

"Not before! Couldst thou think of me, wish for me, now—now, when thou must deem me perjured, false? Lady, sweet lady, oh, do not speak to me thus gently; better harshly, better proudly—for oh, have I not lost thee?" he sunk on his knee before her, clasping her robe with both hands, and raising to hers his speaking eyes.

"And yet I trust thee—yet I know thou art not, hast not played me false! Amiot, I had not loved thee could my mind thus waver, sentence thee without a hearing; but I forget what I am, forget that thou, thou hast struggled for me, and in vain." Her voice grew more and more faltering, and, mocking every effort at control, she sunk on the nearest seat, and burst into a passion of tears.

Sir Alan sprung to her side, almost as much agitated as herself; he threw his arm around her, but so respectfully, Douglas himself had scarce condemned the action. He spoke to her gently, soothingly, recalled to his own noble self by the suffering of one beloved.

"In very truth this is sad, foolish weakness, Amiot, I know not myself; but it is passed now, and I am Isoline again. Sit thee beside me, and tell me all thou hast come here to tell; first, who art thou?—'tis strange my woman curiosity hath not asked this before, but truly I have either dreamed of such a face or seen it once before." So she spoke, even while her whole frame trembled with the violence of emotion, while a sensation of sickly faintness was upon her, while the large tears stood on the silken lashes, giving new softened beauty to her features, despite the quivering smile upon her lips.

"Thou *hast* seen it, Isoline. Perchance, if I tell thee to whose weal, whose liberty my life was vowed, thou wilt scarce give my lips the painful task to speak a name which must be hateful to a daughter of the Bruce. Men

said it was to a bride or a betrothed my life was pledged. I heard them at first unheedingly, carelessly, my only desire being to conceal effectually my name, which, were the truth known, would undoubtedly be discovered; but when I saw thee, when other feelings took possession of my soul, I longed to contradict the rumour, to tell the whole world my heart was free as was my hand; but I dared not, lest I should betray more. Isoline, it was a mother's liberty I sought."

"And that mother is Isabella of Buchan, and thou art Alan. Oh, fool, fool that I was, not to divine this from the first!" exclaimed Isoline, in a tone of such bitter self-reproach it almost lost Sir Alan his partially-regained control; "thrice-blinded fool, when I pondered again and yet again on thy devotedness to our poor afflicted Agnes, striving to reconcile it with the tale they breathed of thy betrothment to another; where was my boasted penetration? oh, had I dreamed of this, how changed had been our fates!"

"Wouldst thou, couldst thou still have loved me, Isoline? A Comyn—son of a rebellious, hated, condemned race; one stained with attempted regicide, with treachery and crime."

"What signified thy race, when him I loved was in himself a host of truth, of honour, loyalty, valour—all that chivalry claims and woman loves," answered Isoline, impetuously. "Alan, Alan, how little knowest thou a woman's heart, to dream a name could arm it 'gainst a life! No, no, 'twas the foul tale they told, that Alan of Buchan was sworn to England, that blunted every faculty and blinded me to facts now so palpable!"

"And thou didst believe that tale?" inquired Alan, mournfully.

"It was not till there were those who told me they had seen thee, Alan, and then I did not hold thee false, but held perforce to act the part they told; and not always I believed this, but rather that the first tale I heard was true, and, to hide his unnatural crime, Buchan had substituted some other in thy stead."

"And thy penetration there told thee truth. It was to conceal a supposed crime my unhappy father promulgated a falsehood he has now utterly repented and atoned. Listen to me, Isoline; my tale is a long one, and now, alas! may avail me nothing; yet thou shalt hear all, though I did not

think to tell it thus." He paused, in evident emotion, but conquering it with an effort, continued, "Thou knowest all the particulars of my beloved mother's capture, that she was conveyed to Edinburgh, under the horrible impression that her patriotism, her devotedness to Scotland and the Bruce, had caused the execution of her only son by a father's hand. I too was told this, and the horror of the agony this intelligence would occasion her almost caused me to waver for a brief interval, and betray the wanderings of my king, trusting that, even were this known to his foes, it could avail them little, as the three, nay, the four days which had intervened would have taken him out of reach of all pursuit. But this decision did not last long; better my mother should believe her Alan dead than dishonoured, the one were a less pang than the other, and I wavered no more. How the deceit of my death, even, I believe, to the discovery of my dead body, was carried on, I am ignorant; but a young man of my age and size, one of my father's personal followers, had fallen in a previous strife, and as they stripped me of my clothes, to robe me as a felon, I imagine his body was wrapped in them, and thus heightened the deception; that, however, is of little moment now. I was dragged blindfolded I knew not where, save that we traversed many miles of rugged land and crossed the waves, and when my fetters were loosed and sight restored, I found myself in a rude fort, on a solitary rock, with the broad ocean rolling and tumbling round me on all sides, save the south, where the bleak, bare, rugged shores of Caithness mingled with the clouds. I was but a boy; but, oh, Isoline, not the fuller, more perfected consciousness of manhood could have felt more keenly, more bitterly the horrors of this captivity, worse a thousand times than death. Separated as by death from all I loved, cut off from every dream of hope, of young ambition, burning with desire to strive for my country and my king, to signalize myself as my mother's son, and wash away, through my exertions, the stain upon my race—every hope was gone. I was surrounded by rude almost savage forms, whose very language I could scarcely understand, and whose visages were hard as the rock they peopled, and whose hearts no more sensible to the agony I endured—the wild, vain yearnings for freedom—than the boundless ocean roaring round. Once they

chained me, with mocking gibes, to the flag-staff on the tower for three days and nights, in punishment for an attempt to fling myself into the waves, and kept me fettered and doubly watched from that time forward; and temptation was not wanted to add its suffering, Isoline. Again and again there came offers of freedom, honour, wealth, if I would but take a solemn oath to forswear all allegiance to the Bruce, to join my father in his oath of vengeance upon him, and in his fealty to England—a promise of perfect liberty of action in all save this, nay, even communication with my mother. Twice did my father himself seek me to make these offers, to threaten severer, more horrible imprisonment, were I still obstinate; and many more times did these fearful temptations come through others, with all the insinuation of eloquent oratory, persuasive gentleness. I scarce know how I resisted; but I did, God in heaven be praised, I did! Even then, then my mother's image did not desert me; she came upon me in those moments of horror, of trial, more terrible than words may speak; her voice breathed in my ear, strengthening me in my hours of darkness, and I resisted. They could not make me false!"

"Alan, Alan, in mercy cease! were we other than we are, were that brief vision of bliss realized, and I might love thee, oh, I could bear this, glory in thy truth; but now, now, that my soul must root thine image thence, that I must forget—forget—God in heaven, tell me not these things, I cannot, cannot bear them!" and the high-minded girl buried her face in her hands, vainly struggling to subdue an emotion that shook her whole frame with sobs.

"Isoline, dearest, noblest? I have done, I will not linger on these things; perchance 'twere better to have left them in their darkness. But to whom should they be divulged, if not to thee, who, despite of mystery, of appearances so against me—thy very eyes must have condemned me—could still trust, still believe I would clear up all? And deem not this a stolen interview, 'tis with the king's consent I am here, with his permission that I speak."

"How?" interrupted Isoline, hastily.

"Yes, Isoline, but now I left him, pouring into his kindly ear enough for him to wring my hand and wish that Douglas had been other than my rival; that things had chanced other than they are; to bid me seek thee this once,

and tell thee all which thy generous heart hath made thy due, and then—then to bid thee, as Isoline Campbell, farewell for ever—'twas better for us both."

"Ha! said he so? suspects he aught concerning me—didst say aught of me?" hurriedly inquired Isoline, removing her hands from her face, on which a vivid flush had spread.

"What might I say? boast that, though Douglas had thine hand, I had thy noble heart; that thou hadst so honoured me beyond my deserts as to half own thy love—say this, when thou wert lost to me? no, lady, no. He taxed me with my sadness, that now a mother was restored, all of mystery solved, how might I grieve? and I told him wherefore, Isoline—that madly, wildly, I had dared to love—in secret love, though not in secret woo; and had not a closer duty, though, alas! not dearer love, commanded a mother's freedom before all personal joy, I not alone had loved but I had won thee."

"And he, King Robert?"

"Said much in my favour that it boots not to repeat; seemed on the point of asking a question—for thy name was trembling on his lips—then checked himself, and wished the mystery around me had been solved before, and granted my request to see thee, and myself explain that mystery, without a moment's pause. Thou art glad he so far trusted me, sweet one; pardon me, lady, thine eye shineth brighter."

"Do not heed me—do not seek yet to read my thoughts; and oh, Alan, call me Isoline—Isoline still; when the wife of Douglas," she shuddered, "it will be time for that cold word lady. Tell me of thyself," she continued, hurriedly, as fearing she had said too much; "how couldst thou escape from thy dreary prison—how elude their ever-watchful eyes?"

"I had been there now perchance," he answered, "had not a merciful Providence interposed to save me, through the person of my foster-father, who in his deep love had sworn to discover my true fate, and rescue me if living. To do this he entered the service of the earl, my father, who, from his long absence and utter desertion of his Scottish fiefs, had wholly forgotten his person, a forgetfulness my faithful Cornac was very careful not to disturb. He became

so useful to his master, so adapted himself to his caprices, that gradually reserve gave way, and, after a trial of his fidelity for eighteen weary months, he intrusted him with the secret of my existence, his desires that I should embrace the service of Edward, acknowledging that there were strange feelings busy at his heart whenever he thought of me, which made him yearn for my submission, that he might love me ; but despite of this, if I would not take the oath he demanded, then I might die, he cared not. Cornac heard him attentively, and promised his best assistance. Old and wary, Cornac effectually concealed from my father his overpowering delight at the intelligence of my existence ; but when after two years of fearful trial he held me to his bosom, the tears he shed were all-sufficient evidence of his previous suffering and present joy. Still he had a weary task to perform ; made seneschal and governor of the islet tower, a stranger to the habits of the rude inhabitants, he knew he must proceed cautiously. As for me, the bare mention of freedom unshackled by conditions threw me into such a state of excitement, that reduced, exhausted as I was, fever followed, and brought me to the very brink of the grave ; but this was rather a matter of rejoicing than of sorrow to Cornac, for such was what he wanted. He knew he had sufficient of the leech's art to cure my bodily ailment, but he made no attempt to do so publicly, but reported I was dying of an incurable disease, and gave all who chose free access to me, that they might see there was no falsehood. But I need not linger on this ; suffice it, that messengers one after another were despatched to my father, each with more alarming reports of my danger and approaching dissolution. This was a device of my faithful Cornac to have the sole charge of me to himself, and his plan succeeded, for now my liberty and life were safe in his sole keeping. At nightfall he conveyed me to the mainland, providing for my still weak state of health ; he tarried not an hour, but hastened, as he said, to report my death himself, and so well did he succeed, that my father not only believed the tale, but became gradually tortured with remorse that my cruel captivity had caused my death, and that he in consequence was my murderer. With health renewed, I joined the armies of the King of Norway, but that was not struggling for Scotland ; my heart was filled

with an intense yearning again to fight under my sovereign's banner, and regain my mother's freedom. At length, after a year spent abroad, Cornac consented to my returning to Scotland, on condition that I would solemnly swear not to divulge my name or identity until I could do so in perfect safety, for he naturally feared the vengeance of my father, should the deceit which had been practised upon him be discovered. My only wish then was to devote myself to my loved and injured mother; I had already, in my vigil at arms before receiving knighthood from my sovereign's hand, taken a solemn oath to devote my whole life to her happiness, to rescue her from danger or imprisonment, and it was therefore without a moment's hesitation I pledged myself to all, nay, more than he desired. I told him I would conceal my features from every eye, divulge my name to none, until my mother's liberty was gained, her name cleared from the faintest breath of calumny. I thought not of the difficulties that would attend the adherence to my vow; the spirit of chivalry was upon me, my heart burned to avenge my mother's wrongs, to bind itself irrevocably to her, and flinging myself before an altar of the Virgin, I took the vow which this day dissolves.

"On joining the Bruce, another and far more powerful incentive than my personal safety urged me to strict concealment. I was a Comyn; every week, every month, proved more and more the detestation in which that line was held. Would I, could I acknowledge myself one of a race vowed to the destruction of the Bruce? no; it was enough to feel I was one, that I bore a name synonymous with everything dishonourable, disloyal, murderous—aye, murderous, for was not the secret and open hand of the Comyn ever armed against the Bruce? I had at first thought to proclaim whose liberty I sought; but speedily the conviction that in proclaiming this I should undoubtedly excite suspicion concerning my own name arrested me, and I felt myself compelled to darken yet farther the mystery around me. On my first arrival in Scotland, the sensation of liberty, of treading my own land, of having the free, unshackled power to raise my sword for Scotland and my mother occasioned emotions of exhilarating buoyancy, of bliss unlike anything I had ever experienced before. Thou lookest inquiringly; oh, long before I looked on thee, that strange buoyancy had

fled. I was *alone*; merciful heaven, what did not that word comprise? The dishonour of my race pressed upon me, crushing me to the dust, and then came the foul rumour that Alan of Buchan was not dead, but false. I, *I*, who had endured such horrible agony to preserve my loyalty to my king, my very brain reeled—and men believed the foul tale; I had no power to undeceive them, for my vow was registered in heaven, my mother's freedom mocked my efforts, and darker and darker grew my onward path. Fears, perchance groundless, unfounded, grew upon me. I had obtained that which I had so yearned for, the confidence, the regard of my sovereign, the friendship of Scotland's patriots, but they knew not I was a Comyn; if they had, would they not have spurned me, hated me? I could not speak these fears, and so they obtained shape and colouring, and hemmed me in with wretchedness; and then I beheld thee, and thy voice was ever kind, thy look full of that voiceless sympathy my spirit longed for. Isoline, too soon I saw the precipice on which I stood; I loved thee, I, a poor adventurer, a Comyn, yet I dared to love a daughter of the Bruce. I saw thee surrounded by the bravest, noblest, best, what right had I to mingle with them?"

"What right? the right of honour, valour, truth," interposed Isoline, turning her full dark eyes upon him, and speaking with dignity, though sadly. "Alan, acting as thou wert the part of a patriot subject's son, in what could the world cast shame on thee? thine own heart should have been thy safest judge, *that* could but approve."

"Lady, it should; but thy gentle heart dreams not of the bitter agony of bearing a name condemned to detestation, branded with hate and scorn. I loved thee, Isoline, yet I asked myself how dared I love—how dared I permit a personal feeling to come between me and my vow? to think, to dream of happiness when my mother still languished in captivity, whence I had sworn to rescue her. I shunned thy loved presence; I sought to harden my heart, to steel it 'gainst such softening throbs, but I could not, no, no, I could not; if thou hadst power over hearts where hope and joy alone had resting, what was not thy power on one lonely, wretched as myself?" he paused, almost convulsed with emotion, and Isoline could not trust her voice in answer. After a brief silence, he continued, more calmly—

"I looked upon my afflicted sister, and thy gentleness, thy fondness, which bound her torn heart to thine, made me love thee more. She was the only being with whom I might claim affinity; we were alone of our race. I sought to make her know me, but the effort failed, and yet I loved her more than ever; and every deed of kindness, every look, every word of love from thee to her increased thy power, till my heart contained but thy image, beat but at thy voice. They told me the Douglas was thy sovereign's choice, that he would be thy husband, and how dared I come forward as his rival? If there did come a thrilling whisper that thy look was less proud, thy voice less cold to me than him, I dared not listen to its voice, for how might I seek thy favour without a name, with nought to lay before thee but a heart which would have felt it bliss to die for thee? how breathe aught of homage, when men said I was betrothed to her whose liberty I sought—when I gathered words from thee, betraying thou, too, hadst heard and didst believe the tale, and held all words of homage and of love but meaningless to thee, disloyal to another, nay, that my devotion to my unhappy sister had sunk me in thine esteem, as strangely at variance with the suspected origin of my vow? Isoline, Isoline, thou didst not know, thou couldst not guess the anguish thy words occasioned, the evening previous to my demanding news of my mother, before the gate of Berwick's guarded citadel—and, oh, the intolerable agony of that crushed hope; it had sprung up, loaded with such sweet flowers, to be withered ere their fragrance was diffused; and again I struggled to banish the love I bore thee as vain, wholly, utterly vain. But why linger on this. I heard thy lips proclaim that superior valour might win thine hand, I heard thine avowal at the same moment that thou hadst but regard, esteem, not love to give, and my heart sprung up again. I might win thee still, for the day that decided thy fate gave my mother liberty; burst, and for ever, the shrouding folds of mystery—thou knowest the rest. I left thee, every sense absorbed in the sweet delicious dream that for me thou mightst feel more than cold regard, that did I win thee, my name, my rank should not weigh against my claim; and then I heard a second recompense for valour had been published, one which would give me the opportunity of literally fulfilling my vow—for who might dream

the nameless adventurer, vowed already to a lady's service, could dream of striving for thy hand? I thought to tell thee all, my position of agonized indecision; but what would that avail me? Thy word had passed to become the bride of him who won thee, and wouldst thou, couldst thou annul this for me? No, I would win both, and won them I should, had my noble steed not failed, I would have won thee, Isoline—but what avails it now? Merciful heaven! to know, to feel thou lovest me—I scarce knew how much I loved before, and yet to lose thee thus—why did I live to say it—why lived to lose thee? Better to have died!”

“No, Alan, no!” and Isoline turned towards him, and laid her hands, which despite every effort visibly trembled, on his arm, detaining him as he started up in agony; “no, no, do not say so; there are other nearer, dearer claimants on thy love. Oh, think on the mother for whom thou hast dared, hast borne so much, and whose love, whose worth demands yet more; think of the poor afflicted Agnes, to whom, though she knows thee not as a brother, yet thou art so dear. Alan, dearest Alan, live for them, for me!”

“What? of thee!” passionately answered the unhappy young man. “How may I think of thee as the loved, the happy wife of Douglas? wilt thou, canst thou wed him?”

“My word has passed, I cannot recall it, unless he give it back,” replied Isoline, with dignity, even though her tears were falling fast. “Alan, leave me—nay, nay, I speak not in anger, I need not that reproachful glance; we must part, and wherefore lengthen an interview harrowing to us both. Leave me, Alan, and take with thee my earnest prayers for thy welfare, my fervent sympathy in thy joy of regaining a mother such as thine. Go, in pity do not linger; forget me, save as a true and faithful friend.”

“Forget thee!” reiterated Alan. “Isoline, Isoline, can the love of years be banished by a word? But thou art right; why should I linger, when to gaze upon thee thus but swells my heart to bursting? King Robert trusted me, I will not abuse his trust. God bless thee, keep thee, lady!”

He stood before her a moment erect, seemingly calm, but

it was only a moment ; the next he had flung himself before her, covered the hand he had seized with kisses, and then, with an almost inarticulate "Isoline, dearest Isoline !" rushed from the room.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THE retreating steps of Sir Alan had faded in the distance, but still Isoline remained where he had left her, pale, mute, motionless as a statue ; then, as if nerved by sudden resolution, her features relaxed in their painful rigidity, though her deadly paleness remained. She sat down, evidently determined to conquer all appearance of emotion, then rung a silver bell beside her ; it was answered by an attendant.

"Has the Lord James of Douglas quitted the convent ?" she inquired, and there was not even the faintest quiver in her full rich voice.

"He hath but now returned, lady, resolved on waiting thy pleasure to admit him again ; he did but seek his pavilion to bring with him the banner of St. Edmund, which he carries to lay at thy feet."

"Tell him I will see him now, nay, that I desire his presence," she answered, and the attendant departed.

It was not ten minutes after this message was despatched, that Douglas, radiant in happiness and animation, obeyed the summons ; but to Isoline it had felt an age of suffering, which was so vividly impressed upon her beautiful features, notwithstanding her calm and dignified demeanour, that Douglas sprung towards her in unfeigned alarm.

"Lady, thou art ill. What has chanced ? speak to me, for heaven's sake !"

"I have sent to speak to thee, Douglas," she replied, with an effort at a smile, which affected him infinitely more than tears, "and I will, when this foolish heart can gain sufficient courage so to do ; but truly it needs more time than I believed."

"Courage—time—and to speak to me. Ah ! how little canst thou read the love I bear thee, and thou canst hesitate to ask me aught."

"Nay, 'tis because I know thou lovest me that I pause," replied Isoline, becoming more and more agitated. "Douglas, thou hast read my face aright. I am wretched, my own proud heart hath made me so ; but my happiness rests with thee."

"With me?" repeated the astonished earl, gazing at her troubled countenance almost in terror ; "and canst doubt one moment I should hesitate to purchase that happiness, even with the price of my own?"

"Wilt thou, canst thou ? generous, noble !" burst from the lips of Isoline. "But why should I ask it—why demand it at such a price ? Douglas, Douglas, why hast thou loved me?"

"Who could know thee, watch thee as I have from childhood into youth, from youth to a womanhood beautiful, glorious as thine, and yet not love thee, lady ?" replied Douglas, deeply affected ; "but let me not speak of myself now—enough, thou art unhappy, and seekest friendship, consolation at my hand. Oh, speak then, dearest, best ! 'tis agony to see thee thus, and feel I can relieve, and yet thou'rt silent."

"Silent, hesitating no more," answered Isoline, successfully conquering the feelings that almost crushed her, and dashing back the gathering tears, she turned those large, beautiful eyes upon him, and laid both her hands in his.

"Listen to me, Douglas ; I will not wed thee, deceiving to the end. Thou shalt read the heart thou seekest ; thou shalt know its every throb, its most sacred sigh, and then, an the struggle be too great for thy exalted soul, an thou still demandest that which thou hast so gloriously won, be it so, I will still be thine. Douglas, thou hast sought me, believing my heart free, unoccupied, save by the love of freedom, power, woman's caprice, which my actions have evinced, my words acknowledged. I told thee I had nought but cold regard to give even to him who won me ; but I said not that I could love, nay, that I did love, and that it was in the wild hope the object of that love would prove it was returned, by joining the noble band who struggled for me, that my hand, as the reward of glory, was then proclaimed. Do not start, do not look thus : I have more to tell, and how may I have courage to proceed?"

The face of the Douglas had become pale as her own,

while the unconscious but convulsive closing of his hands on hers betrayed at once the agony her words had caused ; still he made a sign for her to proceed, and she continued.

"Douglas, I was not deceived ; though he might not join those who thronged round me that eventful night, in presence of my royal uncle and his court, for he might not then proclaim his name and solve the mystery around him, still, aware that the day which obtained my hand gave him also a name, he besought my permission to strive for me with the rest, and it was granted, for it was this I sought. A dearer duty interposed between us ; the fulfilment of his vow demanded his first exertions, and thus it was he failed. Douglas, dear, generous friend, thy valour hath won my hand, but the love thou seekest, the love thou deservest, oh, I cannot give thee ; it hath mocked my control, it hath passed from my own keeping ; my heart hath shrined but one image, and, oh, it hath no room for more. Perchance I have deceived, have done thee wrong, in permitting thee to believe so long my heart was free, and thus might become thine own ; but how might I, dared I breathe unto another what I had denied unto myself ? Oh, hadst thou but loved me as a brother, as I love, esteem, and reverence thee, Isoline had had no secret from thee, even of her heart ! Thou hast a claim upon me now, I acknowledge, nay, adhere to it. I ask nothing but as thine own noble spirit dictates ; I have laid bare my heart, have told thee all. My hand is thine, if still thou claimest its possession, still believest I alone can make thee happy."

There was a long pause. The iron frame of the stalwart warrior shook as would a child's ; still he held her hands, still he gazed upon her face, upturned to his in all the beautiful, confiding frankness of her nature ; his very lip became white and quivering, and the big drops of intense though internal suffering stood on his tightly-drawn brow. Isoline could not witness this agony unmoved ; he felt her hot tears fast falling on his hand ; he heard the low sobs that would have vent, and there was one deep though evidently smothered groan, and then he laid one trembling hand upon her head, and uttered her name.

"Isoline, look up, beloved one !" his voice grew firmer after the first agonized effort ; "tell me one thing more ; he whom thou lovest—is—"

"Alan of Buchan," replied Isoline, but in a voice so low, it could have been heard by none but one so intent as Douglas.

"And he loves thee, Isoline—loves thee, and will make thy happiness his first, his dearest object? Canst thou trust thy future fate to his keeping without a fear?"

"Aye, as I would to thine," was her instant reply.

"Nay, Isoline, thou must trust it something more. In my keeping, alas! there would be little happiness," he struggled to speak playfully, but he overrated his own powers, and the last words involuntarily breathed such intense suffering that he abruptly paused. "Yes, thou mayest trust him; he is, in truth, noble, faithful, well-deserving of woman's love, aye, even of love like thine. I should have seen this, known this, but I was blind, wilfully blind. Isoline, dearest, noblest! for such thou art in thy glorious truth, oh, do not weep. Thou shalt, thou shalt be happy. Give me but time; my energies are stunned—I am not Douglas yet. But thou shalt not have trusted me, confided in me in vain; give me, give me but time. Thou shalt know how dear is thy happiness, how much I love thee; but now, now, God of heaven! now—"

There was no other word, the hands which still clasped hers were cold as stone; he drew her close to him, his lips, burning and quivering, lingered on her brow; he released her, unconscious that the pressure of his hands was tight even to pain, that too at length gave way—another moment and he was gone.

Sir Alan's impulse to rush from the convent, he cared not whither, was arrested by the appearance of the king and the countess, whose anxiety to gaze again upon her Agnes, even though she dreaded finding herself unknown, could not be restrained. The haggard appearance of the young knight could not fail to attract notice, but there was evidently such a struggle for control, that both the king and countess checked the words of anxiety upon their lips.

"Thou must not leave me thus, my Alan. I have regained thee too brief a period to lose thee even for an hour. I want thee ever near me, my child, or I may deem this joy still but a dream of happiness, from which I yet may wake."

So spoke the countess, seeking to soothe the sufferings she

intuitively felt sprung from a wound she might not heal, by an appeal to his filial love, and he felt the appeal. Left alone together while the king went to mark the state of Agnes, the reports of whom had alarmed him, Isabella engaged her son so effectually in conversation on all that had befallen him in those long years of agonized separation, on all she had endured, all her feelings, that unconsciously a calm stole over him, and he found himself listening with intense interest to his mother's simple yet trying tale, and by the time they were summoned to the chamber of Agnes, he was sufficiently controlled to accompany his mother. The king met them in an antechamber, the animation of victory, of his thrice-glorious success had given place to an expression of anxious mournfulness, which struck Alan at once.

"My sister!" he exclaimed, "oh, what of her?"

"She is changed, Alan, I know not how; I can scarce define it. It seems strange three short days should have produced a difference so striking. I fear me, lady, the hope I have ventured to breathe is vain; that lovely frame is sinking fast, even as the mind grows clearer."

"Thinks your highness she will know me? hath she any recollection of her mother?" falteringly and tearfully inquired the countess.

"I scarce dare answer, for her only thought as yet hath been of me, rejoicing in my glory, in the freedom of her country, murmuring of him, whose task her sweet and gentle fancy pictures now as done. She sleeps; the lady abbess deems it better she should in waking find thee beside her, that thou shouldst wait her waking; her slumbers are brief as they are light. Canst thou bear to gaze upon her, lady? she is changed e'en since thou looked upon her last."

"Fear me not, my liege; let me but see my child."

The wish was granted; again did that mother gaze upon her suffering child, again kneel beside her couch, where she lay, so frail, so lightly, the cushions seemed insensible to her weight. She lay like a flower, whose loveliness and purity beams forth even from its closed petals and drooping head. A stillness as of death pervaded the chamber, though many lingered within it; the countess and King Robert sate on either side of the couch; Alan, with arms folded, leaned against the wall at the foot, his eyes fixed upon his sleeping

sister; the abbess sate at some little distance, but watchful, anxious as the rest. An hour passed ere a slight movement took place in that sleeping form; her eyes unclosed, and fixed themselves in wondering *consciousness* on her mother's face.

"Am I still a child?" she murmured; "have I never quitted my childhood's home? Mother, is it long since we parted? it seems so, and yet it cannot be, or how wouldst thou be by me, watching my slumbers, as thou hast done so oft before? Where am I—is this the Tower of Buchan? and Alan, dear Alan, where is he? I would kiss thee, mother. Why can I not rise?"

Subduing emotion with an almost convulsive effort, the countess tenderly supported her in a sitting posture, and the arms of Agnes were instantly folded round her neck, clinging closer, yet closer to the bosom to which she was so fondly clasped, while the tears and kisses of the countess mingled on her cheek.

"Do not weep, sweet mother; speak to me, it seems so long since I heard thy voice, and yet it cannot be; my sleep cannot have been so long as it appears."

"My child, my blessed child!" was all the countess could reply, despite her every effort for less agitated words.

Agnes hastily lifted her head, a sudden contraction convulsed for a single instant her features, and she put her hand to her brow.

"It cannot have been all a dream. Have I not lived ages of suffering since I heard that dear voice? I thought I was still a child, but childhood cannot have such strange, dark memories. Yet thou art my mother. Yes, yes, and that is Alan, my own, darling Alan. I cannot be so deceived; but it seems so long since I have seen either of ye—as if a blank had effaced existence. Mother, my own mother, hast thou been with thine Agnes all this time? I do not think so. Fold me, fold me closer—do not leave me again; oh, it is so blessed to look upon thy sweet face!"

She was silent a brief while, and neither her mother nor brother could speak in answer. Alan had caught her hand, and was repeatedly kissing it.

"Is there not some one else I miss?" she resumed. "Alan, dearest, is Nigel gone? would he go without farewell?—oh, no. Ha! who is that?" her eye had caught the

countenance of the king looking upon her with strong emotion. "That is not Nigel; no, no!" The voice changed suddenly and fearfully, a darker and longer convulsion passed across her beautiful features, she struggled to speak, but for a brief minute only indistinct murmurs came.

"Thou art my mother; oh, 'tis all clear now! there is still a blank, but what caused that blank? It matters not, 'tis all over now; my husband, my dearest husband, thine Agnes will soon join thee; death has no terrors, no sorrow, for it gives me back to thee. Mother, Alan, do not weep for me, life could have no joy alone. And thou, my sovereign, there is a dim sense of unfailing love, unchanging kindness from thee to me, where all else is blank. My husband blessed thee with his dying breath, and so, yet more gratefully, more earnestly, doth his poor Agnes. Nay, tell me not of life, I know that I am dying—memory, sense, consciousness are all too clear for a dwelling upon earth. Is there not one other I would see, one I have dearly loved—Isoline, my kind, my gentle Isoline, or is she but a creation of my brain? yet her image seems too palpable; an there be indeed such, oh, call her to me."

Words cannot describe the expression of feature that followed the convulsion in which consciousness returned. The Agnes of previous years seemed suddenly restored, save that every feature was etherealized; it was as if every grosser particle had fled, as if an angel had already taken that form, and waited but the archangel's summons to wing her flight above. She had laid her head upon her mother's bosom, a smile of heavenly peace beaming alternately on her and the king, for Alan had sprung to obey her will. A few brief minutes and Isoline stood with her brother by her side.

"Ah, it was no vision, no vain fancy. Isoline, dearest Isoline!" she exclaimed with sudden strength, and springing up, she threw her arms around her neck, her lips met hers with one long, last kiss, and she sunk back. "Mother, he calls me; do you not hear him? Nigel, my husband, they have loosed my chains; oh, I may come to thee—joy, joy—I come, I come!"

There was silence; in its fulness, its rich, its thrilling sweetness that voice was hushed, but so unchanged, unshadowed was that angelic face, it was long, long ere a

breath, a sob might whisper of death. That mother's glance moved not from her child, as if she still dreamed of sleep, of life—oh! who might undeceive her? neither King Robert nor Alan could break that stillness; but gently Isoline approached, she knelt before the countess, and, raising her hand to her lips, whispered, "The last word was joy. Lady, sweet lady, how may we grieve?"

Isabella's head drooped on her shoulder, with a burst of relieving tears.

"A little while, and I too may joy the earthly chains are loosed, my blessed child at peace; but now I feel only what my yearning heart hath lost—my beautiful, my own!"

It was near midnight, and Alan and Isoline sate alone beside the dead. The former had succeeded in persuading his mother to retire from that melancholy task, and it was on his return from escorting her to an adjoining chamber, from lingering awhile beside her, that he found Isoline bending over the beautiful form of his sister, imprinting a parting kiss upon the chiselled brow. It was evident she was not aware of his intended return, and had delayed the impulse of her heart till he had departed. She started, as on rising from the posture of devotion in which she had sunk she beheld him. He could see the flush of indecision pass across her expressive features; his own breast felt so calm, so tranquillised, that it seemed as if in the holy presence of death even the society of Isoline could not disturb it. He approached respectfully.

"Go not, lady," he said, "an it please thee to rest beside all that remains of one we have both so dearly loved. I have promised my mother that I will not leave this mournful vigil till morning dawns; but an thou wouldst my absence rather than I should share it with thee, I will report the change of watchers, and doubt not she will rest content. Go not, I beseech thee, an thou camest hither to stay!"

"I do not shun thy presence, my lord, nay, would share thy vigil; this is not a scene, a presence for aught of earth or earthly love to enter on, and for the brief while I linger here it needs not thou shouldst go. I fear no weakness now!" She spoke calmly and collectedly, and nearly an hour rolled by and still found them on either side the dead; but no word or sound disturbed the stillness. No one who





casually glanced on those lone watchers might guess their relative positions, the thoughts that perchance were struggling unexpressed in either heart. Large waxen tapers burning, two at the foot and two at the head of the couch, shed their soft light directly upon Agnes, who lay, not like sleep indeed, but beautiful as sculptured marble, every feature so perfect and in such deep repose, no thought of anguish could linger in those who gazed upon her; all of suffering had passed, it was calm, placid, lovely as a child's, breathing of the peace to which she had departed—and for ever. The face of Isoline was concealed by her right hand and the long loose curls that fell around her, in her left lay the cold hand of Agnes; her whole position denoting her mind was with the dead alone. The gaze of Alan lingered alternately on his sister and on Isoline, seeking in that still, holy hour the strength he so much needed, but not so much engrossed as not to become conscious that the light of the tapers at the foot was impeded. He hastily looked up; a tall, martial figure stood before them, his head uncovered, his arms folded in a long wrapping cloak. One glance, and Sir Alan had arisen.

"Douglas!" he exclaimed; "my Lord of Douglas, can it be—yet wherefore?"

"Wherefore should it not be, Alan? Who could associate with the suffering, the loving Agnes, yet mourn not she is gone, despite the gain to her? I sought thee, Alan, ignorant of that which had befallen thee, and they told me I should find thee by thy sister's bier."

He paused abruptly. Startled by his voice, Isoline had risen from her drooping posture, had fixed her large eyes inquiringly upon him, for there was something in the very calmness of his tone that terrified her. He had stepped more forward, and having dropped the cloak from his face, the light fell full upon it, and disclosed so fearful a change of countenance that both Alan and Isoline involuntarily started forward, with an exclamation of alarmed surprise. It was as if an age of agony had passed over him, leaving its indented furrows on his features. There were deep lines on his noble brow and round his mouth, which, when he ceased to speak, appeared involuntarily to compress, as if still under the influence of immense bodily pain; his cheeks, usually ruddy, were deadly pale, rendered perchance the

more remarkable from its contrast with the naturally swarthy hue of his complexion. His eye strangely and fearfully bright, yet appeared sunk deeper in its socket, from which the burning agony within seemed emitted in restless flashes; his hair, generally rough with natural curls, now lay on his brow damp and matted; and there was something in his whole appearance so unlike himself, that Alan, wholly unconscious of what had passed, felt his warmest sympathies aroused, and forgetting he was his successful rival, all but that a noble companion in arms was under the influence of some whelming distress, grasped his hand, exclaiming—

“In heaven’s name! Douglas, what has chanced—what hath befallen thee?”

“Befallen me? why, nothing,” he answered, returning the friendly pressure with a frank though quivering smile. “Nothing but an unexpected strife—a battle, which hath wearied me and left me as you see, looking perchance somewhat exhausted, but not conquered, Alan. No, no, Douglas is conqueror still!”

“My noble friend, what can you mean—a strife—a battle? I have heard nought; nay, thou dost but mock me, the fiercest strife never made thee look thus.”

“I never knew the meaning of those words ‘fierce strife,’ until to-day, my friend. I tell thee I have fought and have conquered, and am wearied, though triumphant still!”

“Conquered—fought—in heaven’s name! with whom?”

“*Myself!*” replied Douglas, with such a deep thrilling emphasis on that single word, that it spoke a life. Alan dropped his hand in speechless wonder, keeping his eye fixed on him as on some superior being, but the effect on Isoline seemed stranger still.

“Douglas, Douglas!” she exclaimed, with bitter tears; “Oh, no, no, no, ’tis I have done this; I alone have caused this anguish!”

Douglas put his arm around her, but he pressed no kiss upon that beautiful face, lost in such remorseful sorrow, upraised to his; a slight convulsion might have contracted his features, but it was so momentary that even by Isoline it was unseen.

“Nay, speak not so false a word, sweet one, or I shall chide thee. Thou shalt make Douglas prouder, greater,

nobler than he hath been yet, and shall this be a cause of sorrow? For thee, Sir Alan, tell me truly, solemnly, for the holy presence in which we stand is no place for flattering deception. Bearest thou no enmity, no envy towards the Douglas for a success, a triumph dearer to him than all the blushing honours men say that he has gained? Are we still comrades, still friends?"

There was a pause, a struggle; for the distress of Isoline, the answering words of Douglas had caused a revulsion of feeling in Alan's bounding heart, and he had stepped back in silence and in gloom.

"Yes," he said, at length, and he placed his hand in that of Douglas; "yes, thy worth is too high, too glorious for Alan Comyn to disdain thy friendship, even though thou bearest from him the dearest hope, the loveliest treasure of his soul. Enmity—oh, not thus degraded am I; envy—try me not too hard, my lord. How may I love, love as thou dost, and yet not envy?"

"And is thy love like mine, Alan? were her happiness distinct from thine, thinkest thou—but enough of this, I will not press thee hardly. Thy words are cold, but I will make them warm; thou shalt love me, Alan, the Douglas will make himself a home in your united hearts, and mourn not he is lonely. Isoline, loveliest, noblest, look up and smile; said I not I would seek thy happiness above my own, and couldst thou doubt me? Alan, here, in the holy presence of the dead, I resign my claim. Oh, love each other; oh, be true, be happy! and I ask no more. Nay, speak not," he continued, with strong yet controlled emotion, "let no shade, no care for Douglas come athwart the pure heaven of your bliss; he loves you both too well to mourn that, for your sakes, awhile his life is lone.

Gently, as he spoke, he drew the weeping Isoline to his bosom, and pressed a brother's kiss upon her lips, then placing her in the arms of the agitated Alan, breathed on them both his blessing.

Oh, virtue, unselfish, immortal virtue, how glorious thou art! how faint, how pale, how shadow-like seemeth the warrior's glory, the sage's wisdom, the lover's glowing dream to thee. Art thou not the voice of Him who breathed into man the breath of life, and giving thee birth and substance in his soul, bade thee linger there, despite of woe

and sin and care—linger, when oft imagined flown—linger, when seeming crushed beneath the dull and massive woes of earth—linger, as still the golden link 'twixt earth and heaven, the invisible essence uniting man to God, his soul to glory? Oh, beautiful art thou, and glorious the triumph, which, though oft unknown to earth, is caught up by thousands and thousands of ministering spirits to that throne where eternally thou dwellest, eternally thou reignest coeval with thy God!

CHAPTER XXXIX.

THE effects of the battle of Bannockburn on the external glory and internal prosperity and happiness of Scotland is a subject too exclusively belonging to history to be lingered on by the chronicler of chivalry and romance. Some brief notice of the fate of the prisoners we must take, and our task is well-nigh accomplished. The spoil collected from the field alone was inestimable, and the large ransoms paid by the numerous prisoners of exalted rank added immensely to the national treasures. A very few weeks sufficed to give King Robert the blessings for which so many years, despite of dawning prosperity and individual glory, he had so intensely yearned. His wife, his sisters, all those beloved relatives and friends, who, from adherence to his cause or love for his person, had for so many years languished in English prisons, were released, their liberty eagerly granted in exchange for that of the Earl of Hereford, Lord High Constable of England. Again was Scotland a free, an independent, nay, more, a triumphant kingdom, strong in her own resources, united in herself, glorying in the sway of an enlightened sovereign, combining in his own person the wisdom of the sage, the prescience, the prudence of the statesman, and every dazzling quality that could adorn the patriot and the warrior.

Peace was upon the land, her silvery pinions shedding a lucid lustre on the colossal spirit of freedom, now with gigantic tread claiming Scotland as her own. The glittering sword was exchanged for the sceptre of the

judge. The court was no more 'mid glens and plains, and rocks and forests, nor was the royal palace merely the resort of iron-clad warriors, amid whom the noble matron or the gentle maiden seemed strangely out of place. Rank, beauty, glory, worth, all who had clung to King Robert's service in time of need were welcome there; and joyous in truth was it to the good king to feel reward was in his power, and deal it with unsparing hand on all he loved, on all who so loved him. From the palace to the hut festivity and joyousness danced along the land; from the king to the serf there was nought but one deep feeling of chastened and thankful bliss, permitting, encouraging the dark memories of the past, for in them the present was sanctified and blessed.

Many of the Scottish nobles serving under the banner of Edward had been taken prisoners, but were, on payment of some fines and a short imprisonment, received anew into favour, on their earnestly entreating to take the vows of allegiance to their rightful sovereign. Amongst these was the Earl of Fife, who, at his sister and nephew's intercession, found himself restored to his parental estates, without the forfeiture of one title, coupled only with a condition, which, in his present state of mind, he was willing enough to comply with—to recognise Alan as his successor, leaving to him all his restored possessions: married or unmarried, this condition was to hold good, to the exclusion of all natural heirs. Now the Earl of Fife was too indolently and selfishly disposed even to dream of the toils and troubles and little pleasures of matrimony, and, moreover, began, as fast as his volatile and unprincipled character admitted, to take a vast liking to his handsome, gallant, and, what was better still, royally-favoured nephew. His much-injured sister had met him with the open hand of forgiveness and entire forgetfulness of the unkindness of the past, and he hugged himself in the comfortable belief that, notwithstanding many hindrances to his luxurious habits, Scotland was as good a country as England to live in, and her king quite as well worth serving as Edward.

True to his promise, notwithstanding the numerous and momentous events with which the day after the battle had teemed, King Robert with his own lips gave unqualified liberty to that Sir Alan Comyn who had been so long im-

posed on the world as the son of Isabella, and the young man, impressed with the munificence and condescension of his royal captor, voluntarily took an oath never to bear arms against him, and requested permission to retire to foreign lands.

To those in whom the character of Malcolm may have excited any curiosity, it may be well to say, that from his earliest years the Countess of Buchan had been his benefactress; inheriting from his parents' lips and example the love, reverence, and fidelity they felt and practised, his whole thoughts and affections had centred in the countess and her children, and the secret of his wanderings for the first few years after the countess's imprisonment was to discover some clue to the fate of Sir Alan; no persuasions, no representations could reconcile him to the belief that he was dead. The barbarous policy of the Earl of Buchan of course eluded all his efforts; but though effectually concealed by increase of stature, deeper voice, and his disguise from even King Robert's eyes, Malcolm discovered Sir Alan on the instant, and vowed his services and preservation of his secret, with an exulting love and fidelity peculiarly sweet and affecting to the desolate heart of his young master; how he performed that vow our readers are the best judges. Now that his task was done, his beloved mistress at liberty, his master freed from all painful mystery, and blessed with happiness beyond all expectation, he no longer refused to throw aside the page's garb, and adopt the more honourable though graver office of esquire, retaining in truth his love of adventure, but failing in nothing which could add to the welfare and interest of his master.

It cannot be supposed that the detail of Buchan's last interview with his son and the justice he had rendered him could fail of sinking deeply on the noble heart of the Countess of Buchan. It had been a struggle, a terrible almost prostrating struggle, ere she felt she could so school her spirit as to feel she forgave freely, unconditionally forgave her husband the unequalled agony his cruelty, his uncalled-for injuries had inflicted. It was not for her own personal sufferings, those she might have borne without once failing in charity and kindness towards him, but the horrible thought he had ruthlessly massacred his child; a thought she knew his dark stern nature too well to doubt,

and which she had implicitly believed for the eight years of her weary captivity, for the rumour her boy was alive, and the petted minion of Edward's court, had never obtained a moment's credence in her soul—that horrible image filled her whole heart with such a feeling of loathing, of detestation towards its perpetrator, that she almost shuddered at herself. But Isabella knew where to seek for strength to subdue even this too natural but fearful emotion, for comfort even under this appalling infliction. She had thought with comparative calmness on the supposed death of her Agnes, for she truly felt, in the utter loneliness, the dreadful bereavement of her lot, death were better than life, and gradually, nay, almost imperceptibly, by incessant prayer, after years of anguish, her feelings became calmed towards her husband; she could think of him, at first with decrease of pain, then with steady calmness, and at length with such perfect, angelic forgiveness, that had evil come upon him which she could have averted, she would have hesitated not a moment to fly to his side, offering him the hand of amity, of charity, which no dark remembrance could shade. Such being her feelings while still lingering in lonely confinement, how greatly were they heightened when from her son's eloquent lips she heard of his father's deep remorse, and read its transcript in Buchan's own hand. Again and again she pondered on the past, and in the deep though chastened happiness now upon her spirit, which after awhile even the sweet, touching memories of the departed Agnes might not alloy, for earth could have brought her no joy, she persuaded herself into the belief that she, too, had judged harshly; that he had scarce deserved the loathing abhorrence with which she had regarded him. In the deep thrilling bliss of clasping her living son to her yearning heart, how might she recall the agony inflicted on her by the tale of his supposed death? The effect of these secret ponderings may be gathered from her own lips.

It was in an apartment of the Castle of Fife the countess and her son were seated, some three or four months after the battle of Bannockburn. Alan—now known only as Sir Alan Duff, or the Lord Baron of Kircaldie, for the hateful name of Comyn of Buchan might not remain with so faithful and loyal a subject of the Bruce and patriot of Scotland—was carelessly seated on a broad cushion, resting his

arm caressingly on his mother's knee, and looking up entreatingly in her face. All trace of sorrow or care had vanished from his eminently handsome features, and completely recovered from the effect of his severe exhaustion and wounds, he presented a model of manly beauty that man might admire and woman love. They were evidently in very earnest converse, interesting enough to make Alan forget that Isoline might be marvelling at his protracted absence, for she and her mother, Lady Campbell, were both, at the Countess Isabella's earnest entreaty, inmates of her parental castle.

"But, my dear mother."

"But, my dear son."

"Think of the miseries of such a voyage, and the hardships thou mayest have to encounter ere we can obtain even the faintest clue to my father's retreat."

"We, my dear Alan; I do not mean thee to accompany me."

"Worse still, dearest mother; can you think for a moment seriously, thine Alan would let thee take such a voyage alone? but for that matter we will speak hereafter; at present let me for once obtain the conquest over thy noble will. Why shouldst thou seek my father?"

"Rather, my son, why should I not? Alan, I cannot rest in peace till I have personally assured him of my entire oblivion of the past; that, though there can be no affection between us, there is that blessed charity which covereth in truth such a multitude of sins. He wronged me, injured, persecuted me; but now, tormented as he is with remorse, who so fitted to shed balm over his dying hour as the object of those wrongs? He has done me justice, and shall I hold back when a trifling exertion may give him comfort? Listen to me, my child; I owe him reparation for what I have ever felt an act of deception, although at the time I imagined a holy duty to the dead commanded it should be persevered in. I gave my hand to thy father, Alan, in pursuance of an early engagement, entered into by our mutual parents, ere we could have a voice. I tacitly acknowledged the holy vows at the altar's foot which made us one, and solemnly swore to adhere to them to the letter, on all but one point—I could not love my husband; for I was even then too painfully conscious I loved another.

a stranger, whose very name I knew not. I should have avowed this, my child, but my courage failed; but though in this I erred, it was only in this, for I have been true to thy father, Alan, a true and faithful wife. 'The dream of my youth passed away in the deep delight, the blessed cares of maternal love, guiltless alike in word and deed, as in thought; it was not till my solitary imprisonment I learned to feel that had I avowed my real feelings ere I joined my hand with his, much of misery might have been saved me, and much of crime and remorse spared him. I feel I owe him some reparation, my child; and it will be a blessed comfort to my heart to feel that I may bestow it, by proving forgiveness and charity, and, if he will permit me, tending his dying hour. Have I silenced thee, my Alan?"

"Silenced, but barely convinced. I recognise my exalted, noble-minded mother in every word, but still my heart cannot feel the necessity, cannot persuade itself there is any call for reparation. Rather let me seek my father; let me be the bearer of kindness and forgiveness from thee to him, and by my filial love soothe his departing hours. It is my duty as well as inclination to seek him in his exile, and prove to him I feel him still my father. Mother, there is no duty upon thee."

"There is duty, my child, the duty of *proving* forgiveness; it is easy to speak it, but less easy to give it action. Speak not of thy departure; it shall not be. Why shouldst thou leave thy gentle Isoline, resign the honourable post about the king thou bearest—for an indefinite period a painful exile—when thy conduct has been such as to call down on thee all the happiness, all the blessings thou canst receive?"

"And will not this argument hold good with thee, my mother, yet more than with me? What hast thou not borne? what dost thou not merit? But if I may not go instead, let me go with thee; surely, in asking this, I do but claim the privilege of a son."

"Alan, dearest, thou hast risked more than enough for me; hast hazarded thy happiness, all that could make life glad, to win my freedom, to bless me again with life and joy; thou hast heaped upon me such unutterable bliss in thy devoted love, that in very truth I will draw upon it no more. I will see thee wedded to the noble being thou wouldst have resigned for me; to her, that were all the noble maidens of

Scotland set before me, would have been my dearest choice. I will see this blessed rite, and then for a brief period separate myself from my beloved ones, to return to them when a sterner duty accomplished permits a life of unruffled tranquillity and joy. Seek not to dissuade me, my child ; my mind is made up—and more, King Robert's tardy and reluctant consent obtained."

"Ha ! ere thou wouldst confide in me, mother ?"

"Son, I knew all that thou wouldst urge, nay, that perhaps thou wouldst seek the king to beseech his prohibition, and I forestalled thee. Do not look so grieved, my own Alan ; what is this brief separation, painful to us both as it may be, compared to what we have both endured ?"

"Separation ! who talks of separation ?" interrupted Isoline. "Dearest lady, what is this all-engrossing subject, that blinds Sir Alan, even to my presence ? Truly, my lord, an thou heedest me so little, I will summon back all my former power to recall thine homage and obedience. What is this weighty matter ? an the Countess Isabella forbids it not, I demand to know it, aye, every item, sir, on your allegiance."

"And thou shalt know it, lady," replied Alan, gallantly entering at once into the spirit of her words, and bowing his knee before her ; "and then an thou dost not acquit me of all wilful negligence, thou shalt condemn me to whatsoever penance that shall please thee," and seating her by the side of his mother, he resumed his cushion, and briefly but eloquently repeated all that had passed between his mother and himself.

"And must this be, dearest lady—will no persuasion turn thee from thy purpose ?"

"None, love ; for it is duty."

"And it is thy children's duty to go with thee. Alan shall not leave me, for when he and I are one, whither he goes I will go ! Nay, not a word, sweet mother ; for art thou not mine even as his ? Thou knowest not Isoline, an thou thinkest even commands can turn her from a resolve as this. We will go together."

"Nay, dearest, but why shouldst thou leave the comforts, blessings that await thee in Scotland, to follow me for a doubtful good, encountering, perchance, much discomfort, even trial ?"

"And better we encounter it than thee ; but if truly thou

wilt go, so, too, will we," answered Isoline, caressingly clinging to the countess; "and Alan can be spared from court, but not from his allegiance to thee and me."

Who could resist that playful mixture of authority and love? The countess tried alike entreaties and commands to change her resolve, but all in vain; and Lord Kircaldie, rejoiced beyond all control at the success of her eloquence, flung his arm around her waist, pressing more than one kiss upon her coral lips, and marvellous to say, eliciting no manner of reproof.

The consent of King Robert to this new arrangement was not so difficult to obtain as it had been to the countess's departure alone; he trusted, that reconciliation effected, her children would prevail on the high-minded Isabella to return with them, and not, as she had resolved to do, remain till her husband should be released by death in voluntary exile.

The six months of mourning for the lamented Agnes had elapsed, and all was now active preparation for a double marriage; the Lady Isoline Campbell with the Lord Baron of Kircaldie, and Sir Walter Fitz-Alan, Lord High Steward of Scotland, with the youthful, arch, and lovely daughter of the Bruce. On a union which history claims we need say but little; for Isoline and Alan the course of love had not run smooth, but for the Princess Marjory, ancestress of a long line of kings, and to her devoted cavalier it had, and now the last solemn rite was looked forward to with happiness as great to them as by those whose affection time and circumstance had more severely tried.

The evening previous to his marriage, as Lord Kircaldie was hurrying through one of the galleries of the palace of Scone, where the court was again assembled, and in whose ancient abbey the bridals were to take place, he was met by Lord Edward Bruce, joyous as usual.

"Good even, my gentle bridegroom; knowest thou I have been busy in thy service?"

"Your highness honours me. I pray thee accept my acknowledgements, though I know not wherefore."

"Busy I have been, but not successful, Alan, so keep thy acknowledgements. Rememberest thou the minstrel of whose songs I told thee? behold I have sent far and near for that mysterious being, whom I begin now to believe

with the rustics was spirited away from Stirling. He would have verily graced thy nuptials, and I am furious at the disappointment of my scheme. He is not to be found ; reward, proclamation, all have been made and offered in vain. There, that mischievous smile again on thy lip ; by my knightly faith, Alan, I verily believe thou knowest more about this mysterious marvel of minstrelsie than thou choosest to acknowledge."

"I know enough to pledge thee, my lord, that he shall be in the abbey church to-morrow, though I cannot promise in a minstrel's garb."

"How ! is he only thus attired at will—how am I to know him, then ?"

"By the golden brooch your highness so generously bestowed. Your lordship may believe my solemn assertion, that the treasured gift has never for one hour left his possession ; and he who wears it, however marvellous may seem his transformation, rest assured is the minstrel's self. I have puzzled thee, my good lord ; I pray you pardon the solution till to-morrow."

"I know not that I will, thou arch lover of mystery. Tarry ; thou shalt explain this ere I let thee go. Isoline shall wait for thee."

"I cry thee mercy, good my lord," was the laughing reply ; and the young nobleman extricated his robe from Prince Edward's grasp, and joyously departed.

A glowing scene of life and splendour, royalty and beauty, did the old abbey church of Scone present the following morning. It was high noon, and a winter sun played so brightly on the illumined panes, that they flung down innumerable shades of gorgeous colouring on the marble pavement, as if vying with the splendid robes and glittering gems with which the olden shrine was peopled. The good King Robert, and his meek and gentle queen, from whose heart even the memories of the past had vanished before the gladness of the present, were surrounded by a host of Scotland's noblest peers and matrons, of names too numerous for mention, but including all whom, in their country's service, we have met so oft before, and all attired with a richness well suited to their rank and the ceremony they stood there to witness ; and the group around the altar, how may the chronicler's dull pen do justice unto them ?

Both lovely brides were dear to Scotland, the one for herself alone, for not a toil, a danger, a triumph was recalled in which the Lady Isoline had not borne a conspicuous part—softening the first, sharing the second, shedding new glory over the last, binding herself to every warrior and matron heart as part of Scotland; and the other, too, was dear, for they saw but the Bruce in his beauteous child. The princess, blushing and paling, smiling and tearful, alternately, gleamed like some lovely flower, drooping its head from the ardent gaze, seeking to hide the glory of its own soft beauty. The Lady Isoline, lofty, majestic as her wont, perchance a degree more pale, but permitting no emotion to vary her pure cheek; her mouth, her full dark eye, her glorious brow, all breathing a tale of soul, so thrillingly and forcibly, she needed neither tears nor smiles, and might be likened to a radiant star alone in the purple heavens, speaking of more than the beauty it reveals, and chaining our gaze as our hearts 'neath the voiceless magic of its charm, seeming lovelier and more lovely the longer that we gaze. And the respective bridegrooms might have been guessed, had they been placed other than they were. The young Fitz-Alan, flushed with high excitement, buoyancy and joyance so struggling for dominion that he could with difficulty effect control—eye, thought, heart absorbed; seeing nought but her thus soon to be his own, feeling as one in a delicious dream, whose bliss was as yet too deep, too sparkling for reality. Not so Sir Alan—for we must still call him so; calm, collected, every feature breathing the deep, unshadowed fulness of bliss within, but bliss chastened, heightened by previous trial, he seemed well suited to take the vows of love, protection, faithfulness to that glorious one who knelt beside him, and whose eye, when it did not rest on him, so softly and sweetly acknowledged that for him even love of power was subdued, that she could bow her soul to his. But their thoughts, even in that solemn hour, were not alone on themselves; they thought on Him to whom that joy was owing, and deep, unutterable gratitude to him swelled either heart.

The Countess of Buchan, with the parents of Isoline, stood on the left side of the high altar, the king and queen on the right, where the Princess Marjory knelt. Fifty lovely maidens, and as many highborn youths, scions of Scotland's

nobles and knights, ranged alternately, the former bearing wreaths of myrtle and other exotic plants, formed an inner circle two deep, directly around the bridal group; the remainder of the choir and aisles crowded with the noble spectators. The aged Abbot of Scone, released from his weary captivity by exchange of prisoners, officiated at the altar, seconded by the monks of the abbey; the olden organ and its choir, concealed by a rich drapery of velvet and gold, rose behind them, and silence had fallen on that noble multitude, prefacing the burst of choral harmony with which the rites were to begin.

It was at that moment a hurried but military step was heard advancing up the nave and through the choir; it reached a vacant place between the Countess of Buchan and Prince Edward. Alan and Isoline looked up in inquiring wonder, little dreaming on what noble form their gaze would fall, for the kindly policy of the king had found some distant mission on which to employ the Douglas, till that eventful day had passed: yet there he stood, and there was no sign either of haste or negligence in his almost sumptuous apparel, nought which might betray the mental struggle which men gazed on him but to trace. He stood looking yet nobler, more gloriously majestic than e'en on the battle-field, when hundreds fled before his victorious brand, and Scotland hailed him patriot and deliverer. His eye was as bright, his lip as red as was their wont, and who, as they marked the glance of deep yet unimpassioned interest which rested on the bridal pair, might guess what had been the struggle of his soul.

The impressive service commenced, and not a sound was heard in that vast and crowded edifice but the abbot's voice in all the eloquence of prayer. The responses of the princess were scarcely audible, but those of Isoline fell in thrilling richness on every ear and every heart.

Interested as was the countess in the solemn rites, her eye moved not from the face of him to whose exalted virtue her son owed his present bliss. There was no change, no shade in that face, whose deep repose might be likened unto marble; but as the words "Those whom God hath joined let no man put asunder" thrilled along the incensed air, the lip suddenly became compressed, the brow contracted, lasting but a brief moment; but as the lightning flash

discloses the wreck its bolt hath made, so did that momentary change reveal the wreck of happiness within.

But there came no farther change in mien or feature; even when the voice of prayer had ceased, when nought but joyous gratulation sparkled round, when breaking from their thronging friends, e'en from the congratulations of the king, ere they sought the blessing and embrace of the Countess of Buchan, Isoline and Alan, with deep emotion, in brief but heartfelt words besought the Douglas to accept their gratitude, their love, and let them feel and reverence and call him brother, from whom alone of earth their bliss had sprung.

"In your bliss I have made mine own," he cried; "let Douglas claim a brother's privilege, and be the first to give thee joy, to wish thee all of bliss that love and truth may give."

He held their united hands in his, pressed them kindly, and turned to greet the princess and her husband with such smiles and courteous jest the hour might call.

"Art thou not the very king of mysteries, thou naughty rebel?" was the salutation of Prince Edward, after warmly saluting his favourite niece. "How darest thou tell me he who wore my golden brooch was the minstrel I sought? Tell me, an thou wilt not dare my wrath e'en on thy wedding day, how camest thou to possess it? where is the prince of soft lays to whom I gave it?"

"So, please your highness, I can say no more than I have said. The prince of soft lays, as thou art pleased to call him, is before you, ready and willing to don the minstrel's garb wherever and whenever thou mayest command it."

"Thou that king of minstrels, Alan? this passes credence; why he had auburn locks, soft and flowing as a maiden's, and a voice melodious and thrilling as, as—"

"That of my husband," archly answered Isoline; "try him, uncle mine, and trust me for the soft auburn locks so easily assumed, particularly as the face they shaded had been hid from all before."

"But wherefore, why so madly thrust himself on a pike's head, by tempting discovery in Stirling Castle? Verily, friend Alan, if they dub me a mad knight-errant, what art thou? what, in the name of all that's marvellous, took thee there?"

"His mother," interposed the countess, ere Alan could reply. "Your highness was informed the prisoner he sought lay within those beleaguered walls. How think you this discovery had been made?"

"Not by such madness, lady, trust me; truly I can scarce credit it now. Don thy minstrel robe and viol, and I may believe thee."

"And so he shall, good brother, in a more fitting season," answered King Robert; "but for the present day he must fill a somewhat higher station. My lords and gentles, we crave your noble company in our royal halls. The church hath done her duty, and now then let the palace."

* * * * *

Contrary winds and heavy storms had detained the Countess of Buchan some weeks longer than she desired in Scotland, but at length wind and time appeared more favourable, and the vessels prepared for her escort lay manned and ready along the coast of Fife, waiting her commands. Early in February those commands were given, and active preparations in the Castle of Fife announced her rapidly-approaching departure. The morning dawned heavily and stormily, but she heeded not the elements, her mind, fixed on a self-imposed duty, longed but to obey its dictates, and feel that between herself and her husband all was at length perfect reconciliation and peace. Nor had Isoline and her husband wavered in their determination, and now, surrounded by her retainers and by many other noble friends, who had assembled to attend her with all the honour, the respect she so well deserved, Isabella of Buchan stood upon the beach. The boat had been dispatched from the principal galley, it neared the shore, it stranded, and with a kindly gesture of farewell, the countess, leaning on the arm of her son, placed her foot upon the plank. At that moment there was some movement increasing to confusion amongst the crowd; and Malcolm, springing to his master's side, besought him to wait one moment, as he had discerned a horseman riding with such full speed towards them, that their detention for a brief while was evidently sought. Almost ere the words had passed his lips a very aged man had rushed through the crowd, had hurried down the beach, flinging himself at the feet of the countess, and grasping her robe as to detain her, ere breath returned for speech.

The words "Cornac," "my father," burst simultaneously from the lips of the countess and her son, and Isabella, bending kindly over him, bade him rise and rest, she would wait to speak with him, till he could tell her all he needed.

"That I can now, most noble lady," he answered, rising and standing before her. "My task is soon accomplished. I feared but that I had arrived too late, and thy pilgrimage of mercy had already commenced. Goest thou not to Norway?"

"Aye, to my husband; come ye from him?"

"Lady, yes; bearing that charity and reconciliation thou seekest to bestow. Remand thy vessels, lady, for them thou hast no need."

"Nay, my faithful follower, thy mission bears not on my purpose; wherefore should I not proceed?"

"Lady, he whom ye seek, the injurer and the penitent, thy noble, thy generous kindness can no longer avail. He hath gone where man may not reach him; where earth may not bless. John Comyn, Earl of Buchan—sinning but repentant, cruel but atoning—lies with the dead."

THE END.



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